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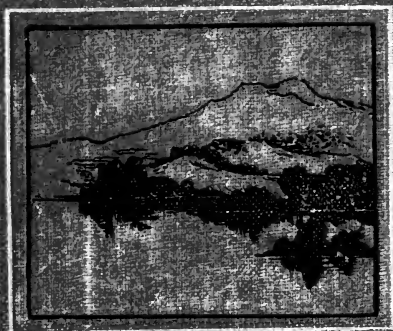
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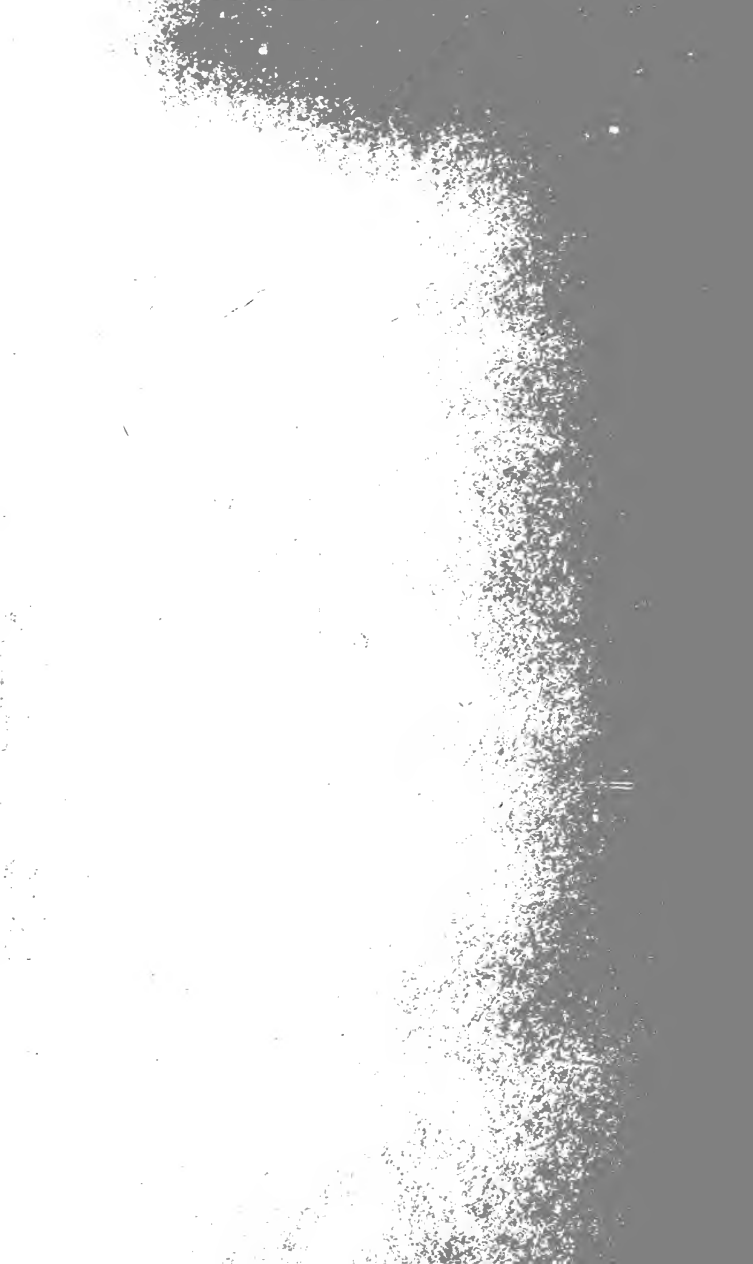
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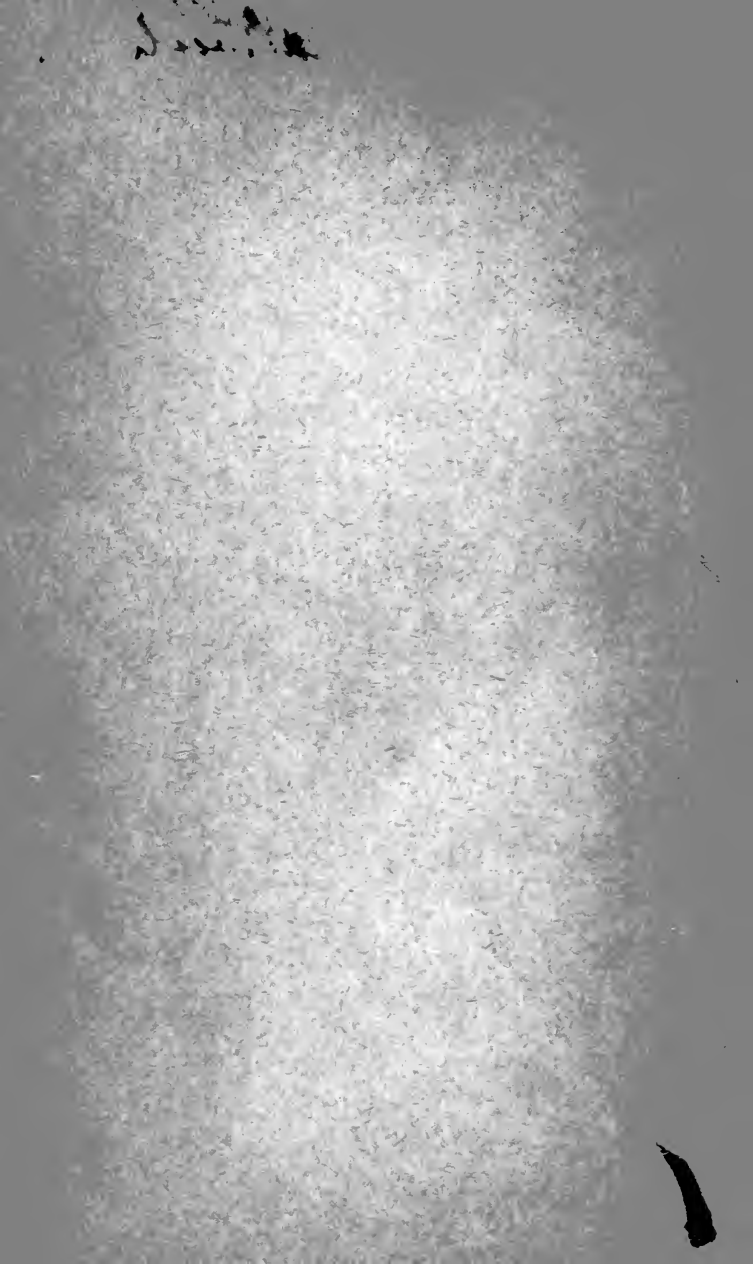




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BETWEEN THE ACTS.

A Novel.

BY
C. H. D. STOCKER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.
1884.

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BETWEEN THE ACTS.

CHAPTER I.

‘Dans tous les beaux arts, c’est un supplice assez fâcheux que de se produire à des sots, que d’essayer, sur des compositions, la barbarie d’un stupide.’—*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

WORSLEY was arranging his studio for the reception of Mr. Bompas, the intending purchaser of the *Ariadne*, and such friends as he might probably bring with him ; Ella was helping industriously, and Dregert, looking very ill, sat wrapped in a large plaid in an

easy-chair by the garden-door, and gave his opinion from time to time.

‘Have you met Mr. Bompas, Ella?’ Worsley asked, stopping to study the general effect of his beloved picture.

‘No,’ answered Ella; ‘but he is one of Mr. Barry’s friends.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Worsley, with a little sly smile, for he was not blind to Barry’s evident admiration of his daughter, and thought it not impossible that Ella might look kindly on his advances.

‘Why, you know it was Mr. Romilly who first opened the negotiations,’ said Ella; ‘but Mr. Barry told me afterwards that Mr. Romilly had only done it to oblige him, and had never seen Mr. Bompas himself. You see, Mr. Barry is always so very busy.’

‘Is Barry coming to-day?’ asked Worsley, and he saw the colour deepen in Ella’s cheeks as she replied that she believed he was.

‘I think Barry’s a good fellow,’ remarked her father by way of letting her know that he was quite inclined to take Barry’s part. ‘There’s always good in a man who works.’

Ella made no comment, but in her heart she was glad to hear his praise; she was still so young that the opinion of the few she loved and admired formed by far the major part of her own, and Worsley’s steady and cordial appreciation of what was good in her unattractive lover would, she felt, go far to reconcile her to the marriage.

It almost seemed as though Dregert too had guessed the drift of coming events, for he also had praise to give.

‘Yes,’ he observed, ‘I should say Mr. Barry is a man you might rely upon through thick and thin.’

Ella felt it was true, and said to herself, ‘What higher character could a man bear? What nobler impression could be stamped upon his face? What surer pledge of happiness could I ask than this, that I could rely upon his faith and trust him in weal and woe?’

‘Get out those portfolios we spoke of the other day,’ said Worsley. ‘He appreciates these things.’

Once more Ella set about making coffee for expected guests, with the same strange medley of beautiful cups and bowls, the large brass tray and fine *repoussé* jugs that they had used before; and she hunted out the little antique spoons that Worsley had bought on that occasion, and thought, with

a sigh, how foolishly happy she had been that day, and that it was no one's fault but her own.

‘Where are those pen-and-ink things of Rossetti’s?’ asked Worsley, bethinking himself that there would be a treat for the initiated; ‘and, by-the-bye, why shouldn’t we hang up that beautiful Magdalene of his? Where is it?’

Ella knew where it was, and soon brought it forth to the light; and while Worsley, mounted on a step-ladder and receiving the advice and criticism of Ella and Dregert, was hammering the nail into the exact spot where the canons of art required that it should be, Barry arrived, and announced that his friend, Mr. Bompas, would be there very soon.

Ella wore an old white muslin gown that had been washed many times—the same, in

fact, though rather the worse for wear, that Barry had so much admired when he first saw her in it, only to-day she wore neither sea-green ribbons nor pearls, but an old silver cross on a little chain, and no colour except the blushes in her cheeks and the burnished glory of her coiled masses of hair.

Barry decided that though each time he saw her he thought her prettier than before, to-day she was certainly prettier than ever.

He took his resolution there and then. Worsley had remounted the steps, and stood balanced on the top of them with his back to the company, absorbed in what he was about; it was evident that Dregert could not move from his chair. Barry accordingly cast an eye towards the garden-door, and felt that luck was favouring him.

‘I never knew you had a garden here,’ he said to Ella, wondering how to surprise her into coming out to him there if he were to step out.

Ella might have been glued to the old black chair in which she sat, for any signs she showed of moving.

‘It is not much,’ she remarked ; ‘but one blade of grass, in London, is better than none.’

Barry stepped out and disappeared, searching rapidly for a pretext ; and presently he came back, and put his head in at the door.

‘Oh ! Miss Worsley — ahem ! I wish you would just tell me—really it seems a shame to ask you to come out—but there’s a thing—most interesting.’

Ella rose and followed him out into the hot sunshine, and glanced about the

scorched and blackened vegetation—the sooty privet and meagre clematis, and the scanty, dried-up grass, and then looked inquiringly at Mr. Barry to ask where the most interesting phenomenon was to which he had alluded.

‘Oh ! It’s not those things,’ he said hurriedly ; and, with a desperate sinking of the heart, Ella knew that her hour was come, and turned very pale.

He saw it, and felt he had not a moment to lose.

‘I hope I am not startling you,’ he said kindly ; ‘I can hardly think you are unprepared for what I have to say. Miss Worsley, I want you to be my wife. I’ve put it off and off, and Lady Draycote has always warned me not to frighten you. But I said, “I don’t think Miss Worsley is afraid of me, and I won’t put it off

any longer." Was I right? Are you afraid?

Ella involuntarily covered her face with her hands, and Barry came and stood close beside her, and began to snap off the dead twigs amongst the clematis.

'Miss Worsley,' he urged, 'you are not afraid?'

'Oh, yes—yes!' she whispered; and her voice would say no more.

'Well, but I'll wait,' Barry said, not giving in by any means. 'I'll wait as long as you like, as long as you'll only say "Yes." Will you just say that much?'

You'd have thought it a mere trifle to hear him. There was a silence that seemed an hour to him—a lifetime to her; and then she raised her pale face, and her hands sank and locked themselves together. Barry bent eagerly down, and she faltered

out an almost inaudible ‘Yes;’ and then shrank suddenly back, dreading she scarcely knew what.

This was not Barry’s idea, however, of a finished bargain; and he came and took her hands in his, lifting them up, and folding them against his breast.

‘And am I not to have one kiss?’ he asked, over her bent head. ‘I call that rather shabby.’

‘Oh, no—no!’ Ella faltered out, in great misery. ‘Oh, please don’t make me!’

Barry was hurt at this insult to his politeness; his hands relaxed, and hers slipped down, and clasped themselves nervously again.

‘I will never try to make you do anything against your will,’ he said. ‘Don’t you know me better than that yet?’

Ella was ashamed, and lifted her face

without allowing herself another moment's respite ; but Barry would not take his advantage, and contented himself with kissing her hand.

‘ I don't want to make you frightened or unhappy,’ he said kindly. ‘ We'll let it be for to-day.’

‘ And you will be patient with me ?’ she urged. ‘ You will give me time ?’

He saw that she was trembling.

‘ I am under your orders,’ he said cheerfully ; and Ella felt that she was safe for the present, although the dreaded step was taken. ‘ They will think—I don't know what they will think, if you go back to the studio with such a white face,’ said Barry uneasily, as they took a turn round the grass plot ; but the mere suggestion that she was about to meet curious eyes brought back her colour, and they returned indoors

to find Mr. Bompas in possession of the floor.

‘How d’ye do, Barry?’ said Mr. Bompas, nodding, and his eyes then resting somewhat curiously on Ella. ‘You weren’t here to introduce me, so I’d to do it myself.’

Mr. Bompas was a large stout man, with a high colour and white hair, and he spoke in a big, cheerful, and somewhat dictatorial voice, as one who is accustomed to take his own way and not be contradicted.

In his shadow loomed Mrs. Bompas, who bowed to Ella, and seemed then in some doubt as to whether she should or should not sit down. Ella wheeled forward a chair for her, and begged her to come and sit near her, and poured out coffee for the party, her feminine eye noting the while the extreme richness of Mrs. Bompas’s black

silk, and the mass of glistening jet beads and bugles with which it was covered.

Worsley never introduced people to Ella unless he looked upon them as personal friends, and the two visitors stared at her not a little in the pauses of conversation, as also at Barry, who evidently knew her very well, although neither, of course, betrayed by word, or look, or manner, anything of that little scene in the garden.

‘Now,’ said Mr. Bompas, allowing Ella to put his cup down for him, ‘where’s this picture of mine? I’ve heard a great deal about it from Barry there, so I shall expect wonders, sir; I shall expect wonders.’

‘Will you be good enough to come this way?’ said Worsley.

As they went down the room Barry noticed the Magdalene that had been put up that afternoon.

‘Surely that’s one of Rossetti’s things?’ said he, standing in front of it.

Mr. Bompas paused beside him, and adjusted a gold eyeglass. ‘Daniel Rossetti, I suppose,’ said he disparagingly. ‘Queer lot of rubbish he paints, I’m told. I think nothing, now, of that picture!’

Ella listened to these remarks across Mrs. Bompas’s rather fragmentary and abrupt conversation, and glanced nervously at her father, who appeared, however, to be in a less perturbable frame of mind than usual.

‘There are very few who understand or appreciate Rossetti,’ said he carelessly, but Mr. Bompas laughed.

‘Ha, ha! That’s good!’ cried he, much amused, and looking extremely knowing. ‘I suppose the picture is for sale, sir, eh?’ and he winked at Barry.

‘No!’ said Worsley, really missing the

drift of the suggestion; 'I am not going to part with it.'

'You'd have some difficulty in doing so, I think,' laughed Mr. Bompas.

'Yes, I dare say,' said Worsley with a smile, as who should say, 'I know the public consists mainly of fools.'

'Now, sir, honestly,' said Mr. Bompas (frankly proposing that they should all lay aside their usual deception and propensities to take advantage of each other), wishing to learn the other's views on the subject of the artist whom he chose to call Daniel Rossetti, 'what do you see in a thing like that? or in any of his things?'

Worsley looked up at the picture and down on Mr. Bompas, and a calm, quiet smile passed over his handsome features. 'You really wish to know?' he said.

'I really do,' said Bompas; and Barry

meanwhile opened a portfolio and idly turned the drawings over, but his eyes, most of the time, were watching Ella.

‘Well,’ said Worsley, ‘I grant in the first place that he is a long way from perfection, either as a painter or an artist.’

‘Ha, ha! A painter or an artist!’ echoed Mr. Bompas, who thought this was pretty far gone in hair-splitting eccentricities, but Worsley was thinking of Rossetti.

‘But in spite of every fault he has the divine fire, the something human and yet more than human—more at least than mortal; something spiritual, mystic, symbolical, which gives life to all he has touched with pencil or with pen.’

‘Indeed!’ uttered Bompas, staring at the picture; and Barry glanced at Worsley’s enthusiastic face with a smile of something between tolerance and compassion.

‘He is apart from the tumult of the world,’ Worsley went on. ‘The hardening influence of the struggle for money, place, public applause passes him by unnoticed; he worships and dreams alone; he ignores those baser things that cannot fail to clog and hinder, or at least to soil the garments of those who mingle in the crowd.’

‘The crowd!’ Mr. Bompas repeated after him, like a child saying its lesson. ‘Indeed!’

‘His soul for ever seeks to pierce the outward show of things—to speak to spirit spiritually. It is an imperfect, struggling utterance, and finds an echo in but few hearts. He is one of those true men to be scorned and contemned in his generation, and appreciated when others shall have taught, by manifold repetition, what men

were too dull and too conventional to learn from him.'

Barry looked up again. 'You really believe, then, in the ultimate value of his work?'

'Indeed I do,' answered Worsley, not knowing how Barry construed his own question. 'We can ill spare the spiritual and the unworldly in these days, "artistic" though we all are. Sensitiveness and reticence are too rare. He is one of the brotherhood of the soul—the new aristocracy of thought and spirit which shall triumph in these days of seeming ruin and confusion, when old landmarks have disappeared in the onswEEPing tide of worldliness, scepticism, apathy, and despair. The few whose eyes never fail from watching their pilot star will be our only comfort and refuge when the night grows dark and we

are losing ourselves among its shadows. There *is* a grace and beauty, a something which lifts the soul—not perhaps to any exalted height—but surely lifts it, in Rossetti's pictures, and that is their undying value.'

It was too evident that Barry, so far from any desire to have his soul lifted, thought it very well where it was.

'H'm—yes;' he said, in a dubious, inappreciative tone, for he was too good-natured to laugh at what Worsley put forth with such strong earnestness. 'Well, but I think the little craze for Rossetti will soon die out. I myself bought one or two little things of his that I know I should now be precious glad to get rid of. Their value will not increase, you know.'

'Why should it?' asked Worsley innocently; 'it can't grow less.'

‘Ah!’ said Barry, ‘but when I buy a picture, I like to be sure that it will always fetch at least what I gave for it. I look upon it as capital invested—all these things are just so many investments—and I must say it isn’t often that I make a mistake.’

‘That’s exactly my view of the matter,’ put in Bompas.

‘The same with Frith,’ Barry went on, waving his large white hand, as one who knows a thing or two. ‘Frith’s pictures command merely a passing popularity; they are not art—not, that is to say, a good investment—and therefore I have never bought a Frith.’

‘Quite right, too!’ said Bompas encouragingly; ‘and now, Mr.—er—ahem! Are we to see this wonderful Cleopatra of yours?’

Barry touched his friend on the shoulder.

‘Not Cleopatra,’ he whispered, with a warning frown.

‘Well, I know I ordered one of those heathen goddesses,’ said Bompas jovially. ‘They’re all the rage nowadays, and Mrs. Bompas likes to be in the fashion.’

‘Don’t now, pa!’ exclaimed his wife, laughing. ‘How you do run on!’ and she rose with a little struggle (for she was not as young or as slim as she used to be) from her chair, and went forward to see the picture from which Worsley now drew back the curtain.

‘Boadicea, of course!’ said Bompas, as if he recognised the face; ‘I knew it was one of ’em. You’ve caught a very fine young woman for your model——’ a nudge from the horrified Barry checked his eloquence. ‘Why, what’s the matter now?’ he said, rather testily. ‘She ain’t your particu-

lar——’ but even Barry could be angry on occasion, and there was that in his eye which prevented the guileless Bompas from completing his observation.

Worsley, meanwhile, had grown ominously pale ; and Ella, in extreme anxiety, drew a chair close to Dregert’s, and tried to distract herself by talking to him.

‘Excuse my putting the question,’ said Bompas, fitting his eyeglasses and tilting back his head, ‘but why did you give her red hair? Is it—was it, I should say—a Grecian peculiarity?’

‘It’s the finest colour,’ said Barry promptly ; ‘you see it in all the old masters.’

Bompas accepted his verdict, and walked about from one point of view to another, while Worsley altered the light a little.

Mrs. Bompas took advantage of their

looking the other way to pull Barry by the sleeve.

‘Mr. Barry, who is that bold young woman that made the coffee—isn’t it the model? I call it most improper! Bompas *did* ought to have known better than to have brought me here. I wish you’d tell him to come away.’

‘Her arm, I should say, is a trifle too long,’ was Mr. Bompas’s next criticism, ‘and I don’t like the canvas showing through the skin—gives an air of unreality—looks—haw, haw!—as if you grudged the paint.’

Worsley was absolutely silent, and Dregert tried by signs to catch Barry’s attention, but could not succeed.

It dawned upon Mr. Bompas that he might have found too many faults with the work.

‘I’m pleased with it on the whole,’ he

remarked, in a conciliatory tone ; ‘and I’m sure it’ll look quite a different thing when you’ve given it another coat of paint. When am I to have it home?’

Worsley drew the ragged yellow curtain abruptly across the picture, and, stuffing his hands into his pockets, turned on his heel, as if dismissing the whole subject.

‘I’ve changed my mind about it,’ he said, controlling his fury, although he was ashy pale. ‘The picture is not for sale.’

‘Oh, pooh ! my good man !’ laughed Mr. Bompas uneasily, trying to remove the curtain, but Worsley prevented him. ‘Why, I’ve brought the cheque with me, and I must have the picture. I’ve always meant to have something of yours for a curiosity ; and—haw—really—hum—Mr.—er—ahem ! You’ve done it very well, let me tell you. I’m pleased with it—I can see its faults, of

course ; but, bless you, I was only criticizing. I call it a fancy price, mind you, for an article that hasn't got the trade-mark, but there's very few has your pictures, and I wouldn't mind giving a longer figure. Why, it'll be an advertisement for you, sir. I'll engage to get you orders from all my friends for Minervas, and Magdalenes, and Hebes, and all the whole pack of'em. It won't be under a bushel, sir, in *my* house, let me tell you. I always say to Mrs. Bompas, I don't keep things to myself—I don't. I always think of the good of the *pro bono publico* !'

This was the finishing-stroke for Worsley's self-possession. He had the moment before been suffocating with disgust and anger, and the pompous ludicrousness of this last speech caused a violent revulsion of feeling. He had been walking about the room with his hands in his

pockets (to keep them quiet) and his back mostly turned towards his critic, apparently only waiting till he should have talked himself out; but he now caught sight of the glisteningly complacent face of Bompas as he uttered his last sentiment, and the sudden reaction took him by storm. He fell into a chair and went off in a perfect paroxysm of laughter.

‘This is done to annoy me, sir!’ cried Bompas, staring angrily at his host, and turning purple in the face, and Mrs. Bompas pulled his arm and said :

‘Oh, pa! do come away. I never was in such a place.’

Worsley, prostrate with intense amusement, waved his hand magnanimously, and articulated between the fits of laughter :

‘The door—the door—somebody open the door!’

‘I’ve been insulted!’ roared Bompas, giving his wife a shove to indicate that he did not require her advice, while Ella ran politely to let him out, and Barry hurried forward to do it for her.

‘Oh! do take him away!’ murmured the reckless artist, and Barry hustled the angry Bompas and his indignant wife off the scene of the disaster.

‘I can’t tell you how vexed I am that this should have happened,’ he said, coming back and looking thoroughly annoyed; but Worsley was walking about and laughing so much that the apology fell flat.

When he was calmer Barry recurred to his point, and once more apologized as best he could for Mr. Bompas.

‘And now, Mr. Worsley,’ he went on, ‘I can’t say I’m altogether sorry, for it gives me a chance of obtaining what I

confess I have grudged to Bompas all along. Will you part with the picture to me ?'

Worsley was grave in a moment, and turned away, lifting his hand as if the idea was unwelcome to him.

'I will not part with it at all,' he said.

Barry looked at Ella and said :

'I think you will to me, for I don't think you yourself could value it more highly than I shall.'

Worsley smiled sceptically, and, after a pause, he said :

'You make a mistake in urging me, Mr. Barry, for I don't want to quarrel with you.'

'Indeed, I hope not,' said Barry, as if, however, he did not apprehend such a danger.

'Well, the fact is,' said Worsley, fidget-

ing nervously, 'your standard is not my standard, nor your views of art like mine, and I feel it would be sacrilege to place my work in your hands. You care for nothing but the money value,' he shrugged his shoulders with inexpressible contempt. 'Well, I may frankly say that a money standard is to me the very basest of all standards—the very Mark of the Beast, in fact.'

Barry was not altogether pleased at this frankness, although impervious to much of its force; but he did not easily lose his temper as long as nobody laughed at him, and Worsley was only too serious.

'Well, this time, Mr. Worsley,' he said, making up his mind to ignore Dregert's presence, 'the money is nothing to me, for I should never wish to part with the picture.'

Worsley glanced sharply at him and at Ella, and guessed the truth; Barry saw it and plunged.

‘You understand me, I see, Mr. Worsley; your daughter has to-day consented to become my wife, and the value of the picture to me is its likeness to her.’

Worsley drummed on the floor and turned away his head.

‘Mr. Barry,’ he said at last, ‘this subject can only be painful to us both; let me beg that you will mention it no more. Ella will do nothing without my sanction, and this is a step to which I could never consent to give it.’

Barry stared, as well he might, and then Ella came forward to his side.

‘Papa,’ she said, feeling that Barry was not being fairly dealt with, ‘doesn’t it touch me more nearly than you, and isn’t

it hard upon both of us that you should say "no" when I have said "yes" ?

'I dare say it is,' said Worsley inexorably; 'and I can only say I am very sorry it has happened. Let us forget it.'

Barry took up his hat.

'I can't promise to forget it,' he said, feeling this a little too preposterous, although he quite saw that this was not the moment to press his suit, 'but I will wait;' and therewith he took his leave.





CHAPTER II.

‘Fie on’t ! O fie ! ’tis an unweeded garden.’

Hamlet.

REMAINING in London after what had happened was out of the question ; indeed, Worsley turned his Ariadne with her face to the wall and declared he should paint no more. Before the next afternoon he had packed up his personal effects and gone down to Heathshire with Ella, ignoring every engagement and leaving his studio to Dregert’s care.

‘I shall never come back,’ he said, with a melancholy earnestness that was almost

theatrical. ‘Take the key, and let me never hear the name of Art again.’

His mood was not such as to make his arrival at home especially acceptable to his family, who now had the additional mortification of learning that the wonderful picture was not to be sold on any consideration—not if Worsley should go to gaol and his entire family be ready to die of want—and that the fortune which they had begun to spend some time ago was never to be theirs. It was a frightful blow; none the less so that not one of them dared avow how much of the money was already gone to swell the ocean of their debts. It seemed an ocean to them, though the actual amount of their liabilities may not have been more than two to three hundred pounds, which to many people would seem a ridiculous little sum to fret and struggle about; but

serious enough when it constitutes half your yearly income, and you are by so much hopelessly behindhand. For they needed every farthing that came in to keep them afloat, and the unpayable debts weighed on their spirits and urged them to the utmost limits of self-denial and hard labour. After the little hopeful respite they had enjoyed it was more than ever crushing to find that they were much worse off than before, and utterly unlikely ever to be able to pay it all off. They did not even venture to regret aloud the turn matters had taken, but bore the news in heavy-hearted silence.

And now woe betide anyone who was not prepared to work like at least one day-labourer! for the garden was in a lamentable state of arrears, and Worsley was in a humour for radical reform.

Ella in a short petticoat and loose holland jacket, with a square yard of hat on her head, hoeing between the gooseberry-bushes in the broiling sun, was laughing to think that she was the same person who twenty-four hours before had been doing the honours of the studio and receiving the devoted admiration of her lover. After all, what are these abrupt transitions when you are accustomed to them? Ella worked like any woman in a turnip field, and wondered the while whether she was or was not engaged to Mr. Barry. She confided her doubts in snatches to Janet when they chanced to meet at the weed-heap, or Janet came her way with a loaded barrow; but her sister could not help her, and merely suggested that if Mr. Barry was content to wait, and 'not bother,' Ella

might follow his example. Something would be sure to turn up.

Mrs. Worsley was cooking the dinner and doing the washing-up and general house-work, while some of the children followed her about with lesson-books and repeated fragments of their tasks as she was able to attend to them.

Nora trotted after her from room to room as she made the beds, and rattled off her multiplication-table in her own peculiar style, 'Twice one are two, twice two are three, twice three are four,' and so on, till it would presently strike her mother that all was not as it should be, and she then told her to begin again.

'Twice one are two, twice two are three,' Nora repeated cheerfully, and often she passed undetected; she could say it quite properly when once she got into the right

tack, but she found this the easiest way, and did not see that it mattered which she said.

Jack, after severe warnings not to neglect his Latin and other studies, had been asked what he was doing indoors when the garden was going to rack and ruin, and had left all his books on the drawing-room table (for which he was afterwards duly fined) and gone out to stick some of the peas, cursing his hard fate as he did so.

‘We simply shan’t have a potato,’ said Worsley, regarding with a look of stupefaction and dismay the border which should have produced them, for it was difficult to detect so much as a leaf of a potato-plant. ‘Come now!’ he exclaimed, rousing himself and speaking with an energy that caused a foreboding thrill in the hearts of his hearers—‘come now! I’ll have this border

cleared to-day. If it hadn't been for your idleness—some of you—it couldn't have got into this state. Come, all of you; it's disgraceful !'

'You're to come and help at the east border,' said Janet hurriedly, as she passed Ella and went to the coach-house for tools.

Ella hastened to obey, and found Jack in shirt and trousers fiercely tearing out the weeds while Worsely loosened the earth with a fork.

'Who prepared this border?' Worsley asked, and the tone of his voice made Jack thank his star that it was none of his work.

'Young Smart,' was the answer.

Worsley breathed more freely.

'Ah! I hardly thought anyone but a hireling would have dug in all the docks and quick in this abominable way.'

How they did work when Worsley led the attack! In ten minutes they were all in the most horrible state of heat, and the girls withdrew to discard some of their superfluous garments, and then returned to the charge with fresh zeal. Yard after yard of soil was cleared, and plant after plant of potatoes was discovered, as they forked, and hoed, and pulled and raked, and filled barrow after barrow with weeds, as if their lives depended upon its being done to time.

Suddenly some one raised a cry: 'Those *beastly* geese!' I do hope it was not Janet.

'Some one has left the gate open!' she screamed, throwing down her hoe and setting off at full speed, followed by Jack, her faithful ally in trouble.

Sure enough, one of those in—terminable children, in their artless way, had left the

garden-gate open, and the geese, one and all, had entered the garden and were peacefully finishing up the leaves and half-ripe fruit of the gooseberry bushes ; not a leaf remained within reach of a goose's bill, nor, of course, a single gooseberry.

‘ *Beasts!* BRUTES! FIENDS!’ roared Jack, throwing a clod with each expletive, as the geese, instead of walking out at the wide-open gate, flung themselves upon the wooden palings at the side of it, and went near beating themselves and the carefully trained tomatoes that grew against the palings to death.

‘ Oh ! *do* go quietly, Jack !’ cried Janet, with tears in her eyes. ‘ Fetch the pail and make a clatter in the yard ; perhaps they’ll have a grain of sense for once.’

This experiment succeeded, but not before the tomato-plants hung battered and

drooping, some broken off at the roots, some with only the best branches snapped and dangling futilely from the little tags of list by which they had, with so much trouble, been nailed to the paling.

Janet sent Jack back to his work, drove the geese into their proper place, and tried to dispose the remains of the tomatoes to look as much as possible as if nothing had happened.

It was a relief when the dinner-bell rang, and they might venture to put down their tools and suspend work for an hour.

‘Come, I think we’ve not done badly,’ said Worsley, always the last to lay down his tools. ‘What do you say to some archery this afternoon?’

A morning’s hoeing in an almost tropical heat is scarcely the best preparation for an afternoon’s archery ; but the girls appeared

quite ready to do anything to please him, though they groaned a little to each other in private.

‘It’s very nice, of course,’ they said, ‘and he means it for our pleasure; but oh! think of all there’ll be to do when we come in!’

Jack was told to tether the cow where she would be out of danger from the arrows and also unable to molest the archers; and then he put up the target—they had but one—and retired to carry on the weeding alone, for he had never had much chance of acquiring the art.

Worsley donned his quiver and belt, his guard and his glove, chose a handful of arrows, tried the spring of his bow, and walked through the kitchen looking radiant, and disposed for the moment to give everybody a holiday. Nothing would content him but out they must come at once, leave

the horrid washing-up, the cleaning of the saucepans, the doing-up of the grate, the sweeping of the floor, and everything else, and come and be happy.

He carried out chairs for his wife and the girls ; he told the children to make themselves useful, and set them to drive stray fowls off the course and pick up any brick-bats that might be in the way.

They spent a couple of hours shooting and marching up and down the grass after their arrows, and Worsley regaled them with the story of Mr. Bompas, embellished with his own pungent comments, and they all laughed till they were ready to die of laughing, and as if there were no such thing as poverty and debt in the world.

‘I say,’ said Worsley, when they had all had about enough of it, ‘how about coffe ?’

‘Go in and order coffee,’ said Ella ironically, turning to Sidney who had been keeping the scores on a slate, and the innocent boy went off to do as he was bidden. Worsley laughed, and Sidney soon came back to ask to whom he was to give the order ; and Ella and Janet both jumped up and ran in together, while Worsley went to fetch in the target.

‘Oh, heavens !’ uttered Janet in a harassed tone, pausing to look at the plot of grass—the plot which had once been of grass—where the geese, after the tomato scene, had been shut in to feed. ‘Ella, I thought this would last them several days ; just look at it !’

The washing-green, which had just been given up to the use of these insatiable creatures, presented a very forlorn appearance ; not a dock-leaf, not a blade of grass

was left—all was bitten down to the ground, and the thirty geese lay fast asleep in the middle with their idiotic heads tucked under their wings.

‘In another hour they will be starving,’ said Janet aghast; ‘and the paddock is as bare as this. How I do detest, loathe, and abhor every one of them!’

‘Perhaps they’ll sleep quietly till to-morrow,’ suggested Ella comfortably; for she knew nothing about fowls, except that they were a standing nuisance in the garden.

Janet felt it was hopeless, but concluded to leave it to fate, and get on with the washing-up; for the kitchen and pantry tables were crowded with piles of plates to be washed and put away, and the scullery was almost impassable, so many saucepans stood about the floor and the sink, inter-

spersed with heaps of rhubarb - leaves, lettuce - stalks, potato - parings, and so forth.

To add to their difficulties the fire was nearly out, and the water in boiler and kettle only lukewarm.

If Barry could have arrived at the door that afternoon with a fairy chariot to carry off his enchanted princess, he would have found a breach in the walls, and the princess, I think, would have followed him without much persuasion. He could have had no stronger force on his side than the depressing strain of overwork and over-anxiety which was now brought to bear on Ella with a novel pressure after so many weeks of quiet life in London.

‘Janet,’ said she, as she stood at the sink in the scullery, her arms plunged up to the elbows in grey, greasy water, while

Janet rinsed the plates, and put them into the rack, 'I think, you know, that I ought to re-open the subject with papa. It can't be left as it is.'

'What? The geese?' asked Janet, her thoughts very naturally running on her own troubles.

'Bother the nasty geese!' laughed Ella. 'No; about Mr. Barry, of course.'

Now, Janet at that moment might have given her sister such valuable advice as should have altered the whole course of her life; but suddenly her name was called from the garden in tones of thunder, boding anything but good to the bearer.

She snatched a cloth, dried her hands, and fled to obey the summons, leaving Ella alone amongst the pots and pans.

'Well?' said Janet, rather nervously, as she came round the corner.

‘Well!’ echoed Worsley, in a transport of anger. ‘Well, indeed! Anything but well——’ he broke off, and, with a sarcastic pretence of self-control, resumed, ‘I suppose you observe what your geese are about?’

‘*My* geese, indeed!’ thought poor Janet. ‘They are yours, if you did but know it, which, thank heaven! you don’t yet; and may all the powers preserve me when you ask for that five pounds we gave for them!’

As she made these uneasy reflections, she looked hastily round, and barely caught sight of the wretched geese, when Worsley broke out again:

‘All those beautiful young lettuces, only just beginning to recover the transplanting, are destroyed—all those valuable plants, all those hours of careful labour flung wantonly

away ! Really, when no one seems to care——’

But Janet ran madly away, for she observed that the geese were now trooping across the carrot-bed, tweaking off the young tops as they went, and of three rows of fine marrow peas scarcely half a one was left.

Janet divined that the master could scarcely have discovered this last disaster, for he certainly would not have passed it over in silence ; and her great anxiety now became to get the geese out of sight, and herself out of hearing, with as little delay as possible, although in all her troubles she was always too humane to hurry and flutter her charges. Her care was chiefly directed towards preventing them from each snatching a young cauliflower *en*

passant, and so destroying what little remained of promise for the summer.

This, however, was not the master's theory—not, at least, when he was angry. Whenever you see a fowl in the garden, he might have said, 'Rush at it, pelt it, scatter its feeble wits, and so terrify it that it shall sooner perish of starvation than face that ordeal again.' Following Janet at his leisure, he suddenly came upon the spot where, but half an hour ago, rows of sturdy little peas were flourishing, and he beheld desolation, pallid stumps and broken rootlets, only here and there a few plants that had escaped, as in every wholesale destruction some individuals escape, none can tell how. If he had been eloquent before, his feelings were now too strong for eloquence, and must find vent in action. Smash! went a heavy clod on to the path

beside Janet, and a pebble rebounded and struck her on the hand.

‘Did that hurt you?’ rather apologetically.

No reply. If she had said ‘Yes,’ probably he would have been himself in an instant, but she was too vexed. Worsley snatched up a monstrous pea-stick, and rushed at the geese.

‘Don’t—don’t! You’ll kill them!’ shrieked Janet.

Down sank the exhausted creatures as soon as they were hurried out of their own ungainly waddle, and Worsley fetched a few savage swoops at them with his pea-stick. Janet flung herself between, and at last, with Jack’s help, contrived to bring them all alive out of the garden, leaving the master raving over the irreparable, heart-breaking mischief they had done.

‘How the doose did they get in?’ asked Jack, as he and his sister stood surveying the prostrate, panting flock.

‘*I* don’t know,’ said poor Janet ; and went in to fetch them some water.

‘What’s all the fuss about?’ asked Ella, who meanwhile had made the place quite tidy.

‘The geese, of course,’ said Janet, in a smothered voice ; and she seized the pump-handle, and furiously pumped a bucketful of water, and went out again.

‘Something must be settled about them,’ she said to Jack, ‘and that instantly. I don’t feel like consulting the master under the circumstances.’

‘Well, you needn’t mind the lettuces,’ said Jack confidentially, ‘we’ll get up to-morrow morning and stick in another couple of hundred before breakfast, an

it'll be all right. I've been to squint at the seed-bed, and there are loads more.'

'But the peas? How about the peas?' Janet said with a sob, moved by the dear fellow's kindness.

Jack made a grimace. 'Well, we can't help the peas; but never mind,' said he, 'we shall have all that beautiful ground for something else.'

Poor Janet received this idea with a very watery laugh, and went in to consult Mrs. Worsley, who, having now made the coffee and carried it into the drawing-room, was sweeping out the kitchen.

Mrs. Worsley saw readily enough that with the best intentions it was impossible to pasture the whole flock upon the stones of the back-yard; and that if they were to be kept at all, some fresh fodder must be

provided. So she nobly and courageously undertook to lay the question before the master, while Janet went out armed with a coil of wire and a pair of wire nippers to devote herself to the endless task of mending the fences. And still she knew that even where she could discover no hole those geese would contrive to find a way out.

‘How the gods of Greece might have jumped at this suggestion for the punishment of some of their victims down in Tartarus!’ thought she—‘new, yet with a strong family likeness to the task of Sisyphus or the Danaids.’

She was disturbed in these classic musings by Jack, who came rushing towards her with the news that there were only ten of the geese left in the yard, and that even they were trying to get under the field-gate.

‘Where are the others?’

‘Don’t know. Don’t see ’em anywhere.’

‘What *am* I to do?’ cried Janet, flinging down her wire and plodding wearily round the outbuildings to look for the trespassers.

‘*I* don’t know,’ said Jack; ‘I should have said they were choke-full, and too dog-tired to stir for a good hour.’

‘Can you help me?’ asked Janet.

‘No, I’ve got to weed the onion-bed before tea; I only came round to empty this,’ he replied, carelessly inverting the bushel-basket on his head, and sending a shower of little clods and fine dust over his cap and hair and his grubby clothes.

‘Can you get it done?’ Janet asked with a frown.

Jack shrugged his skinny shoulders

doubtfully, and trotted away back to his allotted task.

‘Defend us!’ uttered Janet, for her own edification. There were all the geese in their neighbour’s hay. ‘How on earth did they get there? Dare I wade through the hay after them, and lay a whole swathe as I go?’ Janet said to herself, as she crawled cautiously through the fence. ‘They won’t come for calling, that’s certain. Will Brutus see me, though?’

Brutus was the neighbour to whom the field belonged, so-called because when they complained of his shooting their trespassing cocks and hens, he alleged that it was no more than he did to his own when they transgressed, and declared that he had quite lately shot his prize Dorking cock dead for daring to scratch in his flower-garden.

‘After that, he’d hardly hesitate to shoot me and all these fiendish geese,’ thought Janet, entering the hay with a nervous plunge.

She drove them back with infinite trouble, laid a board along the bottom of the gate, and went back to her fence-patching.

The history of those geese—those geese that were to have realized a small fortune at Michaelmas—was one long series of disasters.

‘The way they plagiarize our lives supersedes all belief!’ Jack declared, when it was at last decided to begin to eat them, whether fat or not.

All through the leafy month of June, when the grass was waving knee-deep in Brutus’s field, the level only broken by yellow ragwort and docks waist-high,

Jack and Janet used to stand by the boundary-fence and look across the tremulous grey-green expanse and wonder how many of the geese were wandering inanely underneath; sometimes a wicked and foolish white head would bob up about a quarter of a mile away, then another and another, and the Worsleys had nothing for it but to go after them. Brutus sent in a bill—‘To damage of hay-crop, fifteen pounds’—which nobody paid; he then threatened county-courting, but the mastiffs were so savage, or at least they looked so formidable, that nobody would come up to the door with his insulting messages, and the Worsleys took it as calmly as they could. In first getting the geese they had said, ‘Think how easy they will be to keep, because they can’t fly.’ Vain delusion! If they couldn’t fly, at least they could find holes in fences which

escaped the eyes of Jack and Janet, and even of the hens who ran up and down there all day. But this capacity only extends—so to speak—to one side of the fence, and is fairly equalled by their stupendous incapacity to find holes on the other side when you want to drive them back.

Sometimes a neighbour kindly left word that the geese were in the village pound a mile off; sometimes a little boy would appear in the evening with a goose under each arm, caught in far-off ditches, and expect sixpence for his trouble. After a while some of them seemed to be ailing; a few died; some they killed to save their lives, but they were mere skin and bones. One they gave to the poor charwoman, who said she rarely had a mouthful of meat to give to her large family; but even she said

it was not worth the trouble of plucking. and buried it in her garden. This was bitter indeed. They tried to fatten them, but the geese wouldn't get fat; nobody would buy them. There was no escape, they had to eat them every one; *aut non tentes, aut perfice*, but they never cared for goose again.

Worsley's heart smote him when he went in to have some coffee and found nobody there to enjoy it with him; he went to collect his women, for he was the last man to take life alone, whether it brought joy or sorrow. He came out to Janet, who was stooping over her fence-patching, giddy with the broiling sun that beat down upon her shoulders, and asked her if she wasn't coming in to have some coffee.

Janet was rather miserable and cross, and would have liked to say no, but she was too

good to give way; and then Worsley, quite happy again, called out to Jack to never mind the weeding, but just have an eye to those geese till Janet came out again, and then to come in and have some coffee.





CHAPTER III.

‘I’ll do my best a gude wife to be.’

Auld Robin Gray.

NO sooner had they got the garden-work fairly well in hand than down came the rain—not the genial summer showers of which poets are wont to sing, but cold, heavy, soaking, steady rain, making it impossible to work out of doors, finding out all the weak places in the levels, dripping through the scullery roof and lying in pools about its floor, forming large yellow ponds in front of the study and dining-room windows, and

making the wall-papers all over the house turn dark in great patches, and hang loose to the walls.

The house was certainly none too large for the family when they were all inside it, especially when lessons were being done; and Worsley's energies, being checked in the garden, were now turned with the greater force and volume towards the education of Jack and the children.

He took Jack and Sidney into the study, and spent many miserable hours vainly trying to fathom the abysses of their ignorance, or detect a gleam of intelligence in their fuddled manner of working.

Latin, at last, had to be relinquished for a time, and Worsley thought he would make things easy for once; and while Sidney was to repeat, with his sisters, as much as he had learned of Gray's 'Elegy,' Jack was

given a paper of miscellaneous questions on history and geography.

All the elementary geography that Worsley could bring to light consisted of a few such statements as these :

‘ The world is divided into four hemispheres, north, south, east, and west ; winter is caused by the earth’s turning the other way up. The physical conformity of a country, be it land or sea, always shows the destination of the inhabitants : as, a country much intercepted and overrun by mountains shows freedom ; and similarly or contrariwise, the sea enterprise.’

In reply to Worsley’s question, what did he understand by what he had written down ? Jack only said he had it all quite clear in his head, but the language confused him.

‘ I’m not surprised,’ said his father drily ;

what really did sometimes surprise him was that this puzzle-headed, incorrigibly uneducated boy should be his son, brother of the brilliant and scholarly Roland; and of Janet, who could not be beaten by the most abstruse and tortuous sums, who learned languages for her pleasure, and whose intellectual grasp was more that of a man than of a woman; even of Ella, who passed for being clever amongst those despicable beings, other people's daughters. He sometimes thought fate had been hard upon him in playing him such an unaccountable trick. He had no notion what to make of a boy if not a scholar nor an artist; and if Jack was hopelessly removed from scholarship, what could be said of his artistic gifts, when the only thing he had ever been known to draw was mistaken by various members of his family for a house on fire, a portrait of him-

self, a ground-plan of the premises, and a battle-scene? I say *mistaken* advisedly, for these guesses were all wrong ; but Jack was so annoyed at what he considered their flagrant affectation in pretending not to know what it was, that he never told them, and never essayed to use his pencil again.

Worsley turned to the history paper.

‘ What part was taken by John Hampden in the struggle between the Parliament and the King ?’

A delightfully easy and suggestive question, Worsley had thought when he set it, and already in fancy he had seen before him page after page of enthusiastic description, scenes in Parliament, extracts from Macaulay, battles, and fine liberal sentiments running through the whole. Witness his stupefaction when he read the whole thing in this nutshell of an answer :

‘A considerable.’

That was all, and Jack thought he ‘could do history.’

The character of Charles I. was thus dismissed :

‘He was a martyr and patriot of the fine arts.’

Worsley began to wish himself back in London, and I don’t think Jack would have been the man to prevent him had there been but a chance of such a thing. He was much relieved when letters were brought in, and his father being then too busy to attend to him, he might abandon the thumbing of his Latin grammar, or the vacant sucking of his pen in the abortive attempt to rake together out of the rubbish of his memory a fact or two that might, perhaps, pass for history, or at any rate geography ; and exchanging the study for the drawing-room,

might dogs'-ear his old enemy 'L'Avare,' and see a little more of what was going on.

Ella was giving Stella a music-lesson, a painful performance, over which, as she is my heroine, I should like to draw a veil, unless I could be sure that the spectators, before throwing stones at her, would all make a personal experiment, by taking a young person of eight, of average owliness enhanced by a strong distaste for the subject, and giving it—well, say only half an hour's teaching at the piano without losing temper.

Mrs. Worsley was teaching Madge her letters.

'That's A,' said Madge, with a wriggle, for she was young enough to find her lessons a joke at present.

'Well, and what's that?' said her mother,

pointing with her knitting-needle to the next letter.

‘That’s Different,’ said Madge, and looked up before her mother could conceal her amusement, and then there was no bringing her back to work.

Sidney and Nora were being put through Gray’s ‘Elegy,’ in case Worsley should remember that he had ordered them to say it to him.

‘Please, what is “chill penury”?’ asked Sidney.

‘Chill penury,’ began Janet, but Jack interrupted :

‘Exact opposite of hot coppers, of course, stoopid!’

‘Oh!’ said Sidney.

‘Be quiet, Bernard!’ said Janet severely, and proceeded to instruct her pupil. ‘It’s the thing we all suffer from here, Sid——’

‘ And does it make us keep our tempers?’ asked Sidney, ‘because it says, “Chill penury repressed their noble rage”?’

Jack looked up again with a very significant grin, and said:

‘ Old Gray, I ’spect, never tried that part. It ought to be, “Chill penury excited frightful rage.” ’

‘ Oh !’ said Sidney mildly, appreciating the explanation. ‘ And, please, what is “the genial current of the soul”?’

‘ Doesn’t grow here,’ replied Jack ; ‘ doesn’t seem to flourish in the Worsley soil.’

Sidney stared, and Jack suddenly clapped his hands over his ears, stuck his elbows on his open books, and began rapidly muttering over the lesson he was supposed to be learning by heart, while Janet explained the lines ; and then Nora, none the wiser, re-

marked to Sidney, as she put away the book.

‘I shouldn’t care for frozen currants, should you, Sid? And I shouldn’t think those poor angry forefathers did!’

But nobody expected ever to put any brains into Nora’s pretty, amiable little head, and her harmless folly passed un-reproved.

Worsley presently appeared with a couple of letters in his hand, and looked round the room.

‘Come, haven’t these children done their lessons yet?’ he asked a little impatiently; and in a minute, as by magic, the room was cleared. The children were sent into the dining-room to play, and Jack was sent to chop wood in the stick-house. ‘I’ve two important letters here,’ Worsley began, when the coast was clear: ‘one will interest you

all ; the other is, perhaps, more private, and chiefly regards you, Ella.'

Ella coloured and asked no questions, but she felt her heart beating in her throat, for of course it must be something to do with Mr. Barry.

'This is from Roland,' Worsley went on ; 'he is going abroad with two pupils for the Long Vacation: all his expenses will be paid, and he will receive a handsome salary besides. He asks whether I could not manage to join them, and do some painting.'

'Oh, what a pity!' cried Mrs. Worsley.

'How tantalizing!' cried the girls.

Worsley regarded them with profound disdain.

'And why, pray?' he demanded. 'Where is the pity? Why should it be tantalizing?'

‘Oh! We thought of course you would have liked to go, and of course you can’t afford it.’

‘Of course!’ echoed Worsley, looking up at the ceiling. ‘How like women! When there’s no possible reason for a thing, call it a matter of course.’

‘Shall you go?’ asked Ella, and his wife looked up in ill-concealed suspense.

Worsley avoided their eyes.

‘Certainly I shall,’ said he, rather aggressively, ‘and at once too. You talk of affording it as if it would involve great outlay; you just expose your own ignorance. Don’t you know that living abroad, especially in France, is much cheaper than at home? Don’t people go abroad to economize?’

Mrs. Worsley was already going over her mental list of liabilities, and wondering

how they could retrench when he was gone.

‘Besides,’ Worsley went on, ‘I shall bring home portfolios full of sketches and studies. It will be a new field. I may make enough to pay all our bills and enable us to move into a better house. I should call it absolute folly to neglect such a splendid chance.’

‘What shall we do for money while you are away?’ his wife ventured to ask. ‘The midsummer bills are all unpaid, you know ; and the butcher has sent his in twice already, and has put on interest.’

‘Has he?’ said Worsley, a momentary gleam of anger lighting his dark eyes. ‘Very well ; then let him take it off again. I told him I should not pay a penny of it till he had struck off the interest and apologized for his impudence.’

The women were silent.

‘As for money,’ Worsley continued, ‘there are six of the mastiffs still unsold, and worth, at the lowest, three guineas apiece. Advertise them as soon as you like. That will be—well, even if you sell them only at that, it will be eighteen guineas, you know. Then there’s the Alderney heifer—we can’t keep her through the winter—put her at no more than sixteen pounds (she is worth all of twenty), there you’ve upwards of thirty pounds already. Then the pigs will be bringing in a little something ; the geese will be growing fat, and will be eagerly snapped up by the poulterer at Brackenbury, even if you don’t have them all taken off your hands by the people near at home.’

‘Oh, Cecil!’ sighed his wife, ‘I *wish* you had sold that picture!’

‘I can’t be too thankful I didn’t,’ uttered Worsley, with a shudder at the recollection of the sacrilegious Bompas. ‘No, we may be poor, but there are depths to which I hope I may be preserved from descending! Talking of Bompas, however,’ he took up the other letter, ‘this is from Mr. Barry.’

Janet and her stepmother glanced at Ella to ask whether they should withdraw, but somehow the subject did not seem to her a very sacred one, and she smiled and shrugged her shoulders and waited for her father to go on, while Janet looked at her and wondered what it felt like.

‘I suppose I may as well read it,’ Worsley said, glancing through it; and then, turning back to the beginning, he read out :

‘ MY DEAR MR. WORSLEY,

‘ Not knowing when I shall have a chance of speaking to you personally, I venture, in spite of all that passed at our last unfortunate interview, to recur to what I must take the liberty of calling my engagement to your daughter; for until I have her own word for my dismissal, I cannot but consider that we are mutually bound by what passed between myself and her that day. I am content, as I then told Miss Worsley, to wait as long as she wishes; but I should like to hear from her, if you will allow it, or from yourself, on what footing I stand. I need not say how happy it would make me to have your sanction as well as her consent; but at the same time, I cannot think of giving up what is morally mine, unless Miss Worsley wishes it, and herself breaks

off the engagement. With very kind regards,

‘ Believe me,

‘ Sincerely yours,

‘ RICHARD BARRY.’

Absolute silence followed on the reading of the letter.

‘ Well, Ella?’ said Worsley at last, and his face had a strange, half-hidden smile about the eyes and mouth. ‘ Well, what have you to say?’

‘ I think he is quite right, papa,’ Ella said with deep blushes ; ‘ don’t you think it a very fair, honest letter?’

‘ Well ! what then?’ asked Worsley.

‘ Of course I feel that I am bound to him, unless you insist on breaking it off. Then of course it would be my duty to put an end to it,’ Ella said ; ‘ but I think that would be hard upon him.’

Worsley laughed.

‘Hard on him! Oh, very! Not on you, I suppose? What touching vanity!’

‘I mean, there really is no adequate reason for refusing him,’ Ella explained.

‘And have you made up your mind that there are adequate reasons for accepting him?’ asked Worsley, still with that strange twinkle in his eyes. ‘Because, after all, that is equally important.’

Ella, somewhat to his surprise, covered her face with her hands, and was silent; he looked at his wife inquiringly, as who should say :

‘What is this new phase of feminine unaccountableness?’

‘Oh, Ella!’ whispered Janet; ‘how *can* you hesitate when such a blessing lies within your grasp?’

Ella looked up; her blushes had died away, and her face was very pale.

‘Yes,’ she said in a low firm voice. ‘I have made up my mind; I meant it when I said “yes” that day, and I wish to abide by what I said.’

‘Come, that is decided, at any rate,’ said Worsley, and they all felt by his tone that he was pleased. ‘I do like people to know what they mean. The fact is, Barry rather disgusted me by his barbarisms about art the other day. But you can’t make a silk purse out of—ahem!—out of everything. Why expect a stockbroker to be an artist or a poet? But I think him a good fellow all the same, and quite fit, with Ella’s help, to take care of her; and if she likes him I shall not interfere.’

Ella sat listening as he spoke, and if there is a weathercock in our hearts that

veers with changing winds of feeling, I think hers was turning a hundred ways in a minute that afternoon.

‘I don’t care about money, myself,’ Worsley said presently, speaking rather sadly. ‘I spend a good deal, I earn little, I save none. You will none of you have a penny when I am gone, except what the sale may realize. And what is worth fifty pounds when you want to buy it, is not worth fifty shillings when you want to sell it. Barry will at least provide for Ella’s future, and for that I ought to be thankful.’

He spoke with emotion, dimly realizing his deficiencies, and what they were bringing upon the wife and many children who had no hope but him.

‘Dear Ella!’ said Mrs. Worsley, giving her a kiss. ‘I hope you will be very happy; I am sure Mr. Barry will have a good wife.’

Ella laughed that she might not cry.

‘Well,’ said Worsley presently, ‘what are we to say to him?’

‘Am I to write?’ asked Ella rather nervously.

Worsley drummed a little with his fingers on the arm of his chair, and looked at her thoughtfully.

‘What *shall* we do about a trousseau?’ said his wife.

‘Why, she’s only seventeen,’ began Worsley, who ignored the flight of time.

‘No; I am just twenty, papa,’ said Ella.

‘Well, it’s all the same—too young to think of marrying yet awhile. H—m! Well—yes—write to him yourself and say, that although I consider you much too young to marry yet, as long as he is willing to wait and say nothing about it, I have no

objections against it—something to that effect.’

Ella took her writing-case and tried to write a rough copy of the letter, and while she was thinking it over and drawing patterns on her blotting-paper, Worsley and his wife left the room.

In an instant she and Janet looked up eagerly at each other.

‘Janet, what on earth am I to say? How am I to begin? “Dear Mr. Barry?”’

‘“*My* dear,” of course,’ said Janet. ‘I wonder you don’t want to put “Sir;” I should put his Christian name.’

‘Richard?’ echoed Ella. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘Dick, then,’ suggested Janet, laughing, and Ella fell once more to drawing patterns and wondering.

At last she decided to begin ‘My dear Mr. Barry,’ and proceeded in a clear and busi-

ness-like manner to state her father's views on the subject. Then she came to a stop.

‘Janet, how *am* I to sign myself? Oh! don't laugh; it really is dreadfully serious!’

‘Show me what you've put,’ said Janet, holding out her hand for the letter. ‘Well,’ she continued, giving it back, ‘it's all very well as far as it goes, but aren't you going to put in anything personal—anything from yourself?’

‘Oh!’ said Ella, to whom this was a new idea. ‘No; I've nothing to say. Why, what should you think of putting?’

‘If it wasn't that I know you never will have more heart, Ella,’ said Janet rather angrily, ‘I should say you're going to make an awful mistake in accepting Mr. Barry. But, after all, you say he is not demonstrative, so it's better you should be

inflicted on him than on a man who would feel it more.'

Ella took this in silence.

'Can't you say you're glad papa has changed his mind, or that you—well—that you look forward to seeing him again some day?'

'Very well,' said Ella, 'perhaps I'd better put that.' So she turned two stiff little phrases to that effect, and found herself once more face to face with the difficulty of signing herself.

"'Yours truly'" would really express it,' said she; 'or "sincerely," or "faithfully." "Yours faithfully"—I rather like the sound of that. "Yours affectionately" sounds very washy—it's what one always puts when one doesn't care much——'

'Then now's your time to put it, I should say,' interrupted Janet significantly.

‘It’s more conventional,’ Ella reflected, ‘and perhaps he would prefer it.’ So she signed herself ‘Yours affectionately,’ and then read over her first love-letter with a sigh.

‘This is the sort of thing you will write, I suppose, when you start a regular correspondence,’ said Janet sarcastically. ‘“Dear Richard, I hope you are quite well. It is a fine day. The cat has five kittens. I am your dear Ella.” That wouldn’t compromise your lukewarm feelings.’

‘Well, I told you all along,’ said Ella, in self-defence, ‘that I did not very much care for Mr. Barry, only that I thought he would do as well as any other man. And since we are hardly fit to be governesses, it is plain we ought to marry if we have a chance. Besides, Mr. Barry takes me as I am ; I don’t pretend to anything I do not feel.’

‘I suppose that Mr. Romilly was your ideal,’ said Janet; ‘and you see, he turned out quite the reverse of a hero. Mr. Barry, no doubt, is worth a dozen of him.’

‘You see, he *has* a wife,’ Ella remarked evasively.

‘I mean that just shows that you are easily taken in when you are left to your own unaided judgment. Your transcendent hero turned out an ordinary scamp, and this Mr. Barry, whom you only mentioned to laugh at, proves to be as good a man as walks the earth. So much for your discrimination!’ Janet said very reasonably. ‘For my part, I credited you with more sense.’

Ella had her own thoughts on the matter, however.

‘You see, Janet,’ said she presently, ‘you haven’t got quite so far along the

road as I have. I seem to have had a glimpse into life, and I see that the love we used to dream of is a sort of fiction, an illusion just strong enough to lure us into the trap of marriage, which is then promptly dispelled, and leaves us merely the slaves of a new set of circumstances. Wherever you are, you must waste most of your life in labour for the meat which perisheth, in repairing the incessant wear and tear of time, keeping death and destruction at bay, and training your successors to carry on the work—the futile work—after you shall have succumbed. What does it all matter? Why should I care whether I lend a hand here with this house or there with his house? What are women but miserable slaves? And what better alternative have I anywhere?’

At the end of this passionate speech Ella

burst into tears, and they fell down on Barry's letter and spoiled it.

Janet declared she must rush out to the fowls, and Ella dried her eyes and copied her letter again ; only at the end, instead of the little cool sentences which Janet had seen, she wrote : ' I am only afraid that you will be disappointed in me, for I am not warm-hearted or affectionate. I will try to be a good wife to you, but I think you have judged me too well. You think me better than I am, and I feel that you are giving all and receiving a miserably poor return.'





CHAPTER IV.

‘I said, “A tale was made of old,
That I to thee would fain unfold ;
Ah ! let me—let me tell the tale.”
But high she held her comely head ;
“I cannot heed it now,” she said,
“For carrying of the milking-pail.”’

JEAN INGELow.

AND so Worsley furnished himself with sketching-tools and portfolios, joined Roland and his youthful noblemen, and soon afterwards departed on a walking tour through central France.

His family, although they missed him, could not but admit to one another that

they breathed more freely when they had only themselves to look after as regarded food and indoor comforts, and when the children might be allowed a little more latitude in the matter of noise and untidiness.

Ella and Janet encouraged each other to take up their old and much-loved pursuits of drawing and wood-carving; and by the help of the alarum they rose at five in the warm summer mornings, and worked in delicious silence, undisturbed for an hour or two.

Ella made a little studio of the study, and worked at flower-painting, for which she had a decided gift, although, like the other Worsley gifts, it received very little special cultivation. Janet carved in the stick-house, before the window of which her father had fitted up a carpenter's bench for her; sometimes she drew her designs in Ella's special den.

Now, it so happened that Mr. James Brand had also taken to early rising in this fine summer weather, and his morning walk was very apt to bring him across the Worsley premises. It was his business, you see, now that his father was becoming infirm, his elder brother being away somewhere improving his mind, to take care that the various tenants were all keeping their engagements as to fences and so forth; and, of course, it was better to walk over their ground when they would not be likely to feel the intrusion, than to come when he might disturb or annoy them.

Ban and Hardigras, too, in spite of their first violent introduction, were now his fast friends, and did not bark at him when he came.

One morning, when the long dewy shadows were creeping back towards the

climbing sun, Janet, who had risen even earlier than usual, having a grand new notion in her head, placed a ladder against one of the largest of the old apple-trees in the garden, and went swiftly up it with a sketching-block and a little box of pencils and drawing paraphernalia. Clambering, then, cautiously from bough to bough, she at last found sitting-room opposite a cluster of young fruit and leaves which she had discovered the previous day when up this tree on a reconnoitring expedition.

Up there, among the fluttering leaves in the pure freshness of the summer morning, she worked at her design in blissful peace.

After half an hour, she heard footsteps in the dewy grass of the field close beneath her—for the apple-tree grew in the hedge that divided field and garden—and very naturally she supposed that Jack had been

tempted forth by the glory of the hour ; for she hardly suspected Ella of walking in the wet grass.

‘ So *you’ve* turned out, have you ? ’ said she, in the lightly bantering style, mixed with disdain, in which his sisters were wont to address Jack. ‘ And what are you soaking your boots for, gaby ? I wouldn’t have your wits in my head for more than I should like to mention.’

Jack, for about the first time in his life, refrained from a retort ; but Janet was too gingerly balanced where she was to venture to turn and look at him.

‘ I suppose you think I don’t know it’s you ? ’ she said loftily ; ‘ as if I didn’t know the sound of your fantastic foot a mile off ! Why don’t you get. something to do ? At any rate, do have the gumption to come out of that soaking grass.’

She heard him scramble through the fence on to the path and stand there.

‘What an ass you are with all this mystery!’ she exclaimed, in good-natured contempt. ‘Come, don’t waste the precious time. You weren’t born for an actor, so you’d better give it up at once—besides, I hear you giggling and spluttering——’

A violent explosion of manly laughter interrupted her comments, and Janet as nearly as possible fell straight off her bough to the ground, so much did it startle her. As it was, however, she merely let fall all her little pencils and things ; and, after a few convulsive grabs and snatches at the branches round her, contrived to steady herself, and look angrily down on the intruder.

‘Young Brand !’ she said—presumably she only meant it for her own ears, but it

was quite loud enough for him to hear. 'Well, I call it awfully mean, to take advantage of a fellow like that.'

'That is just what I thought,' laughed Brand, standing on the lowest step of the ladder, and looking up at her amongst the boughs. 'Fancy a harmless man, in pursuit of his business, chancing to pass under a tree, and being suddenly assaulted with such a handful of uncomplimentary language! Can you wonder, Miss Janet, that I was not able to answer all at once?'

'Of course, I thought it was Jack,' said Janet sharply.

'Oh, Miss Janet! And do you habitually call him a "gaby" and an "ass," and all that sort of thing?'

Janet coloured.

'Pooh! He likes it. We all do it;

we're not demonstrative, you know. It's our sort of affection—sort of fun.'

'Oh!' said Brand; 'I wonder whether it seems as affectionate and as funny to Jack as it does to you?'

'You'd better ask him,' said Janet crossly.

'May I give you up your pencils and things?'

'You can if you like.'

'Well, but don't you want them?' persisted Brand.

'I can easily get them myself,' was the ungracious retort.

'But I should like to give them to you if you want them,' said Brand good-naturedly; and he forthwith picked them up, and ascended the ladder.

The nearer sight of his bright honest face disarmed Janet's resentment, and she

held out her hand with a smile for her property, and thanked him.

Brand bestrode a somewhat unsteady bough a little below the one she was sitting on, and asked to see the drawing.

‘It’s awfully nice,’ said he. ‘I can’t draw, and I don’t know anything about it ; but you can see those are apples “a mile off”—ahem !’

Janet coloured.

‘I say, how awfully clever you are, Miss Janet ! Is there anything you can’t do, I wonder ?’

Janet did not like this sort of personal observation, so she rather more promptly than politely replied :

‘Oh yes ! for instance, I can’t draw when you’re talking and wagging the whole tree like that.’

Brand looked up at her for a moment

as if to give her a chance of recalling or mitigating her remark; and then seeing she kept her eyes upon her drawing, he grasped with his hands the bough on which he was sitting, cleared it with his feet, swung a moment, and dropped to the ground.

‘Good-morning, Miss Janet,’ he said, pulling off his cap, and looking up as he walked away.

Janet let him disappear, gazing after him with curious feelings of shame and resentment, mingled with rapidly-growing regret. No sooner was he out of sight, however, than she scrambled in violent haste down the ladder at the peril of limbs and garments, and ran with all speed across the garden and round the opposite side of the house to that by which Brand had gone. At the little white gate under the arch, that

adorned the entrance to the flower-garden, she came face to face with him.

‘Oh, Mr. Brand!’ she uttered hastily, and then found she had nothing definite to say.

‘Well, Miss Janet?’

‘Why, I didn’t mean to be rude,’ she stammered. ‘At least I did, but I’m sorry. It’s all your fault, I believe; you say such stupid things.’

‘Well, you should pity me, if that’s all,’ said Brand; and added with some feeling, ‘for it is a much more serious matter for me than for you—I don’t want you to think ill of me, Miss Janet.’

‘Nobody likes it, of course,’ said the young lady demurely, and Brand drew in his horns.

‘At any rate we are friends,’ he said, holding out his hand; and Janet took it in

her rather ungracious fashion, and murmured :

‘Oh! yes, of course;’ and Brand went away.

‘Hullo!’ said a voice over her head, and there was Jack gazing from his open window, hair-brush in hand.

Janet felt herself grow crimson, and contrived to put some of the climbing roses between herself and Jack’s derisive eye.

‘I don’t see that you need brush your hair at the open window,’ said she aggressively, ‘even if it is such a rare sight.’

‘Oh, ho! Miss Priggia Stuckuppia!’ retorted Jack. ‘*I* heard you two fools spooning down there—thought yourselves such crafty dogs all in the early morning! I was roaring at every pore the whole time.’

‘What a lie, Jack! You’re only this

instant out of bed,' said Janet tentatively, hoping to betray him into discrepancies.

““Oh! pity me!” philanders poor Brand,’ Jack said, trying to speak in a manly bass; and then changing it to a little affected sort of squeak, which was to represent Janet’s reply, ““Dear Mr. Brand, let us be friends!””’

‘You little donkey, Jack!’ said Janet, feeling that he really must have heard something; ‘I shall tell Mr. Brand next time he comes, that you’re a sneak—listening like that.’

‘Well,’ cried Jack, who wished to stand well with Brand, ‘why does he come and bawl under the window, then, if he does not want me to hear? You woke me up with your confounded palaver—and I can tell you what, Miss Stiltificatia! it’s Ella all the time.’

‘I don’t know what you mean, idiot!’

said Janet disdainfully, and she heard him ‘cackling’ with laughter, as she called it, while she walked angrily away.

The chief result of this disagreeable episode was that whenever Brand came ‘fooling around,’ as Jack called it, with many a distressingly vulgar wink and nod at Janet, Janet was never to be seen.

‘Next time Brand comes,’ said Jack one day, when he and his sisters were working together in the garden, ‘I’ll fetch you, Janet.’

‘Look here, Jack, I’ve had enough of this bosh,’ said Janet, laughing. ‘Your wit, let me tell you, savours too much of vulgarity to bear such constant repetition.’

‘Savours too much of the truth, my fine friend!’ said Jack. ‘Yes; I shall fetch you when he comes.’

‘You can make a fool of yourself, of

course, if you like,' retorted Janet; 'as to fetching me—how do you know I shall not be there?'

'Oh, I know!' said Jack, tapping his forehead; 'I'm not quite the fool I'm sometimes taken for; and odd as it may appear, I can see, you know, when I've got my eyes open.'

'Ape!' said Janet contemptuously, feeling much smaller than she cared to look.

A day or two after this Brand walked in, and the first person he met was Jack, who greeted him with effusion.

Mrs. Worsley was down the orchard with Lottie and the little ones, and the girls were carrying pails of water up the garden to the celery trenches.

'Janet! Janet! Hi! here—what ho!' roared Jack at the top of his voice.

'My dear Jack,' said Brand mildly,

‘why don’t you go to her? She is not running away.’

‘Well, she generally does when you come,’ said the boy. ‘Janet! here’s Brand come to see you.’

Brand blushed up to the roots of his hair, but he hardly suspected Jack of conscious cheek, though he did just glance at his face to make sure.

‘Jack seems to be in an unusually facetious mood to-day,’ he said by way of apology, when the girls came to meet him.

‘Told you I would!’ said Jack in a stage-whisper to Janet, with a grin; and Brand looked glaringly unconscious, and began to talk to Ella.

‘I see you’ve been budding roses here,’ said he, turning his back upon the *enfant terrible*, and manifesting a lively interest in a row of standard briars with drooping

cabbage-leaves on their tops to protect the buds from the sun.

‘Yes, that is my special *forte*,’ said Ella, showing him the little bass-bound shoots underneath; ‘I hardly ever lose one. How do you think the garden is looking, Mr. Brand?’

‘Why, it looks a great deal better than it’s any business to look,’ said Brand; ‘it makes me quite angry.’

‘Angry?’ said Ella; ‘why, you ought to be almost as pleased as we are. I suppose the place will be worth more when we are gone, won’t it?’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Brand; ‘but you are not thinking of going, are you?’

‘Oh no!’ sighed Ella; ‘I sometimes wish we were.’

‘Good-bye for the present, my *friends*!’ said Jack, with an emphasis on the last

word that caused Janet a little impotent thrill of annoyance, but was happily lost on Brand's unconscious ear, and he took up a couple of empty buckets and ran off.

‘That’s what makes me angry,’ said Brand, looking after him; ‘I sometimes hardly know how to hold my tongue about it. I am glad I’ve never met Mr. Worsley; I know I should break out.’

‘Oh no, you wouldn’t!’ said the girls confidently; ‘you would only long to distinguish yourself under his eye.’

‘I’m afraid,’ laughed Brand, ‘that I should do it in a way he would not admire.’

‘Do you think he compels us to work?’ asked Ella.

‘I don’t think three ladies like you and a bit of a little lad like Jack would do all

this if no one made you,' said Brand, in suppressed indignation.

'Well, we've all been brought up to think it right to work up to the limit of our powers,' said Janet, 'and therefore we do it naturally and of our own free will. Would you have us go deeper into debt, or starve? Live on our friends, perhaps?' she laughed scornfully. 'Thank heaven, we have more self-respect!'

'I am not prepared to offer any wholesale remedy,' said Brand, 'but I say it is a wicked thing that women should work like men. I've seen Miss Worsley digging like a day-labourer—aye, and doing it well, too; and I've seen Miss Janet wheeling great loads of weeds and stones that only a grown man should touch. And I declare,' he went on passionately, 'it makes my blood boil' (he might have added that it brought

the manly tears to his eyes, for the big young fellow had a very tender heart, and even now his voice was not altogether steady)—‘it makes me long to speak my mind, to make him listen to what I think of him, and tell him how I despise a man——’

‘Mr. Brand! How dare you!’ cried the two girls in a breath. ‘How dare you say such things!’

‘I won’t stand by and see you killing yourselves, however impertinent you may think me for interfering,’ said Brand obstinately. ‘I know your father is about the cleverest man in this county, and I’m ready even to believe he is a good man, and means well; but I say what he does is ill, and if you won’t listen to me, I shall have to speak to him.’

‘Ah, you won’t feel quite so valiant

when you've got his eagle eye fixed upon you !' laughed Ella.

Brand felt he was pouring water into a sieve ; these clever girls didn't believe a word of his common-sense, and were entirely at ease in their own confident convictions.

'We don't come into this world to enjoy ourselves and be waited upon,' said Janet—
'we must redeem the wilderness ; and that, you know, you must do where you happen to be put, not where you're not put.'

'Work as much as you like,' said Brand, thinking he had never seen her look so pretty, 'only do what you are fit for. You throw yourselves away upon this rough work.'

'I can't believe we should have to do it if it were bad for us,' said Janet ; 'there

would be some other way of getting it done.'

'No ; you're meant to have the sense and the self-denial to leave it undone,' persisted Brand. 'I believe it's half vanity your doing it all.'

'Of course we take a pride in doing what most people would leave undone,' said Janet, 'or would be too stupid and helpless to succeed in if they did try.'

'You look down so upon the rest of the world,' objected Brand. 'You scorn everybody who thinks differently from yourselves. Why not be a little more open to conviction? It isn't likely on the face of it, although you *are* very clever, that two young ladies like you should be wiser than the rest of mankind.'

'Oh, you mean all the conventional, brainless people who walk in the old ruts

and stop their ears and eyes, and harden their hearts lest they should understand,' said Janet; 'I hope we *are* wiser than they. We don't do things by accident; we think, make up our minds to the right thing, and then go forward, be the other who he may.'

'I know you do,' said Brand, laughing. 'Well, it is no use my arguing with you; you will grow wiser if you outlive it at all. And now, since we are all sent into this world to work, I propose to do some digging, or hoeing, or something. What can you give me to do?'

The girls laughed, and looked at each other.

'Come,' said Brand, 'I'll ask Jack if you won't set me anything. 'I'm going out to the States soon, to take up land, and I shall want all the experience I can carry, so you may as well let me practise.'

Mrs. Worsley, bringing the little ones in to their tea half an hour later, was very much astonished, and not a little shocked, to observe young Mr. Brand in his shirt-sleeves, his yellow hair shining in the evening sun, digging like a Trojan in the garden.

She came up the pathway with Lottie on her arm, and Brand was so absorbed in his work that he did not see her till her ‘Oh, Mr. Brand!’ made him look up, and then he laughed, and apologized for not shaking hands.

‘Can’t that little girl walk?’ he asked, with something of a frown, seeing at a glance that she had no business to be carrying a fat child of a year and a half old.

‘She’s tired,’ said the mother, resting her thin cheek on Lottie’s brown curls, ‘and it

is more wearying to hear her cry than to carry her.'

Brand struck his spade into the trench, beat his hands together and stepped on to the path.

'Will she come to me?' he asked, holding out his hands to the little one with a smile. 'Come, little woman!' and Lottie threw herself into his arms without a moment's hesitation, repaying his goodness the next minute by pulling his moustache.

Brand laughed and pretended to bite the tiny fat fingers, and Lottie went into paroxysms of baby-laughter, and grabbed his curly hair, poked her finger into his eye, and made herself as fascinating as she knew how; and he walked down to the house beside Mrs. Worsley, leaving his coat and cap hanging in the fork of an apple-tree.

'Now, Lottie, say good-night,' said the

mother, when they came to the front-door; but Lottie clung to Brand, and threatened to cry.

‘Don’t you want your tea?’ asked he, with a fine instinctive tact; and Mrs. Worsley took advantage of the relaxed tension produced by consideration of this idea, and suddenly carried her off, thanking Brand as well as she could in spite of the kicks and screams that instantly ensued.

Brand went up the garden, and put on his coat.

‘Just you leave the rest of this for me,’ said he to Jack, who was standing looking at his work. ‘If I don’t come to-morrow, I will the next day. And, I say, look here—don’t let your sisters do too much.’

‘Bless you!’ said Jack, ‘who is to stop two such geniuses as they are—beaming with intellect at every pore—they’re bound

to make a mess of it. It's only fools like you and me that have sense.'

'How do you know I'm a fool?' asked Brand.

'Oh! I knew it the moment I saw you,' said Jack, with pleasant frankness; 'intrinsic deduction, I suppose, or something of the kind. None of your precious prodigies for me! I've had enough of that kind of thing to last me for several generations, I can tell you.'

'Say good-night to your sisters for me,' said Brand, nodding as he put on his cap.

'All right—but do you mean both of 'em?'

Brand turned and looked him very narrowly in the face, and Jack executed a faint wink. Brand, however, was grave.

'Jack,' said he seriously, 'if you and I are to be friends, we must have no more of

this ill-timed impudence. I draw a distinct line between jest and earnest, mind you.'

'Oh, blow! I didn't s'pose you'd mind,' said Jack. 'Of course we must be friends. I won't do it again.'

Shutting up her fowls for the night was Janet as Brand went down the little drive, and he must needs turn aside to pay his respects in person.

'Good-night, Miss Janet,' said he, vaulting over the fence, and crossing the grass towards her.

'Good-night, Mr. Brand. It's awfully good of you to help us; thank you very much.'

'Miss Janet,' began he in a very different tone, and Janet looked into the bottom of the fowl-pail, 'I wish you'd let me work for *you*—I mean, always—ahem!—I mean—Miss Janet, there's a great deal of wilderness

to be redeemed out in the States where I'm going, and if you'd like—Hang it! You're so clever—I don't know how to put it.'

Janet looked up, whether laughing or crying he could not tell, and suddenly dropping pail and wooden spoon with a startling clatter at his feet, she turned and fled round the buildings into the house.





CHAPTER V.

‘And what am I to you? A steady hand
To hold, a steadfast heart to trust withal;
Merely a man that loves you, and will stand
By you, whate’er befall.

JEAN INGELOW.

SUMMER passed into beautiful autumn, and Worsley, professing to be on his way home, was reaping a harvest in Jersey *en passant*. His family meanwhile were keeping the creditors at bay as best they could, and economizing as only the Worsleys knew how.

In the early days of October a new baby came to complicate matters, and Mrs.

Worsley had to submit to be waited upon, besides leaving her share of work to be done by the rest. Nobody felt this a hardship, for however much Jack and the girls might moan and groan over their troubles at ordinary times, they were always cheerful in an emergency, and they now set to with a pleasant energy and goodwill that it did the heart good to see.

Then too, odd as it may appear, the arrival of a new baby, which everybody else thought a melancholy and pitiable thing, was always hailed by the whole family with a generous enthusiasm of delight; and no matter how empty their exchequer might be, they always felt justified by the festive event in ordering a guinea cake, all bedizened with pink and white sugar, cupids, and butterflies, and made right merry over it till it was gone

and the bill came in. They put off the purchase of the cake this time till Worsley should come home.

‘What a heavenly day!’ exclaimed the girls to each other one fine October morning when the still, blue, misty air was fragrant with dying leaves, and the robins were trilling loud on the half-dismantled boughs.

They were trudging across the orchard in pattens with a huge basket of wet linen between them, their sleeves rolled up above their elbows, their skirts kilted high and covered with brown canvas aprons, their pretty bright hair somewhat carelessly knotted up, and escaping in many a sunny little curl about their flushed faces, for they had been up early and working hard for some hours.

The children had to make themselves useful in return for their enforced holiday,

by keeping each other out of mischief; and they were now one and all sent down the orchard to play, Stella and Sidney being in charge of Lottie, who being no longer *the* baby, was emancipated from the maternal apron-string and relegated to the redoubtable company of 'those awful children.'

The girls hung their linen on the hedge and went slowly in, chatting and lingering in the delicious air.

'I know every one of those children will have a pain to-night,' said Ella, looking back as they passed through the gate, and seeing them in the distance stooping suspiciously about under the apple-trees at the far end of the little field. 'They'll eat about a bushel of fallen apples before dinner, you know.'

'Ah, well! then we can make them all

sing small in bed to-morrow,' said Janet. 'We shall at least have them under our eye then.'

'Well, you know last time we had some of them in bed they pulled all the down out of our quilt, broke the looking-glass, ate the pomatum, and terrified us out of our senses by dancing on the leads in their nightgowns and nearly breaking their wicked little necks. I don't much care to have that kind of thing under my eye.'

'At any rate,' said Janet, as they clattered into the back-kitchen, 'they can't do much harm where they are ; we shall be out there, on and off, all the morning.'

They went about their work, Ella to fill up the copper, and Janet to make some beef-tea for Mrs. Worsley.

Presently a shout was raised outside, and Jack ran past calling out : 'The hunt!

The hunt! Come on and see the fun! Thousands of red-coats! Hip, hip, hurrah! and he ran on again to follow the hunt down the neighbouring fields.

An awful thought darted into Ella's motherly mind, and she uttered it as she dropped the pump-handle. 'Janet! those children!' and away she flew across the yard, followed by Janet.

There was the hunt sweeping down from the right, red-coats crashing through the gaps in the hedge and pricking gallantly across the stubble towards the Worsleys' field, which, being grass, was preferable to the newly ploughed land the other side of the copse which skirted the bottom of the field. The more cautious riders, however, were avoiding the somewhat forbidding fence that stood between them and the pleasant pasture, and could be seen filing jauntily

along the edge of the plough-land behind the hazel underwood. Not far ahead the hounds were powdering along, their tails quivering in the air, and a rabble of plough-boys plunged cheering across the furrows.

Ella and Janet saw all this in an instant as they reached the gate; but long before they could run down the field, red-coats and horses had cleared the fence, and were in full career across the grass.

The girls never rightly knew how it all happened. There were shouts, 'Take care! Hold hard! Out of the way, there!' from exasperated manly voices; shrieks from the girls, 'Children! Stella! Sidney! Oh, the baby—the baby! Go back! Stand still!' as they ran to rescue Lottie, who had long been abandoned by her two keepers, and had ensconced herself in a hole where a wasps' nest had been dug out in the summer,

and where she now sat howling dismally. The elder children, feeling guilty, and not quite knowing what was expected of them—*où courir? où ne pas courir?*—ran wildly all about amongst the horses.

Only Madge, who knew no fear, and who considered it other people's business to look after her, walked quite calmly and blissfully right across the path of a rider who had just cleared the fence, and was now close upon her, having chosen a narrow open space between the great apple-trees, which had been quite clear when he put his horse towards it. Janet had snatched up Lottie, and was carrying her towards home, followed by the other five. Not having seen Madge's danger, she supposed that she and Ella were following, and was just opening her lips to pour out a solemn and agitated scolding upon them all, when

a shriek and the sound of a man's furious shouting made them all look round. They were just in time to see the rider swerve sharply to the right, and the next instant he was carried under one of the great apple-boughs and fell backwards from his horse, which plunged forward over Madge and galloped madly away across the fields in front, leaving his master and Madge lying on the grass.

Ella was kneeling over her little sister in an instant.

‘I think she is more frightened than hurt,’ she cried out to Janet. ‘Run home with the others and see that mamma is not alarmed.’

Janet set off with her six charges, and met a stoutish, red-whiskered man in pink riding through the gate.

‘Is there a gap at the bottom there?’ asked he, scarcely drawing rein.

‘Oh yes; but do see if that gentleman is hurt,’ said Janet urgently; ‘there has been an accident——’ but the stout man was half-way down the field already.

Madge was screaming piteously and refusing to be touched, and Ella knelt beside her, coaxing and petting and remonstrating. Behind her the fallen rider was painfully trying to raise himself from the ground, but had to hold on to the trunk of the apple-tree to steady himself.

‘Ella! You? Here?’ Down jumped the red-whiskered man in pink and came up to her, his face beaming with a delight at this unexpected meeting which a discreet regard for the sufferers could not wholly veil. ‘Is it possible? I’m awfully glad to see you again; what an age it seems!’ It was Barry.

‘Oh! Mr. Barry—ahem!—I mean

Richard—I believe her arm is broken. Madge, my darling, let me carry you in nicely. I'll do it ever so gently.'

'Aren't you glad to see me?' Barry asked, without, however, the slightest dash of anxiety in his voice. 'How came you in this field, and—er—why are you got up in that funny fashion? It's becoming too,' he added, looking at her in great admiration.

'This is where we live,' Ella explained hastily. 'Madge, darling, I must take off your coat. Have you a knife, Mr. Barry?'

'Yes, here; but don't call me "Mr. Barry,"' said he. 'Can I help?'

'No, thank you. Look, Madge, we're going to cut your sleeve all to bits. What fun!'

Madge left off crying at this, and watched

the operation with a watery smile, until she observed that her arm was bleeding, when she began to scream again.

‘Why, nonsense!’ expostulated Ella; ‘it’s only a little blood—quite a tiny place really, only it looks——’

‘I am afraid I have hurt the little girl,’ said the gentleman, whose horse had done the mischief, coming slowly forward. ‘I hope it is not anything serious?’

At the voice Ella looked up sharply, uttered a little cry, and suddenly swooned away upon the grass.

It was Lewis Romilly, deadly pale, and looking dazed, with an ugly, irregular gash on his forehead, from which blood was trickling.

‘Miss Worsley!’ he uttered, recognising the face in consternation. ‘Good heavens! She is not hurt?’ he looked at Barry in

agonized anxiety, and Barry too had grown strangely pale.

He shook his head speechlessly, and Romilly knelt down, and with shaking hands unfastened the little brooch at Ella's throat.

'Give me the rein here,' he said hoarsely and hastily, 'and fetch some water—there's my hat on the ground—there's water, I think, in the ditch.'

'Yes, there is,' said Madge, nodding as she sat complacently amongst Barry's horse's feet and fingered the brass buttons on Romilly's coat. 'Your face is bleeding,' she further remarked, looking up at him, and Barry hurried off to the ditch for water.

Romilly, seeing that Ella's dress was quite loose, laid his cool hand on her forehead, stroking back the ruddy curls as he

did it, and murmuring something that sounded like :

‘Ella, darling—light of my soul!’

‘You’re very kind to Ella,’ said Madge, putting his gloves on to her own small hands, and admiring the effect. ‘Are you our new brother?’

‘Who is he?’ Romilly asked, turning his eyes upon the fair little face at his side, while he laid his other hand on Ella’s forehead.

‘Ella belongs to him,’ said Madge, nodding gravely. ‘His name is Mr. Barry.’

‘God help me!’ uttered Romilly, and his hand slipped from Ella’s forehead to his side.

‘We mustn’t swear,’ said Madge; ‘or are you saying your prayers? Did you forget them when you got up?’

When Barry came with the water Romilly rose to his feet, and seemed to think that the horse required all his attention.

Barry took the bridle.

‘You do it,’ said he abruptly. ‘I’m no hand at nursing.’

‘Sprinkle her face,’ said Romilly—‘I’m rather queer;’ and he dipped his handkerchief into the water and passed it across his forehead, bringing it away covered with blood. ‘This is what upset her ; it is too much for many people. I didn’t know. I’ll keep out of sight.’

Barry thought of Madge’s bleeding arm, and knew very well that his explanation would not do.

‘Besides,’ Romilly added, with a faint and ghastly smile, ‘it is more natural that you should do it than I, you know.’ So

saying he led Barry's horse away, and tied him to the fence, while Barry bent over his betrothed and splashed the water over her face.

Ella opened her eyes almost directly, and tried to sit up; and Romilly, as he stumbled over the furrows of the next field, bent only on getting away, turned once, and saw Barry carrying Madge up towards the house, Ella walking slowly beside him, holding by his arm.

Half-way across the plough-land he met his cousin, Jim Brand, who had caught his runaway horse, and was now riding back to see what had become of his master.

‘Hallo!’ cried Brand, pulling up at the sight of Romilly's melancholy figure, as he came wearily towards him, with pale bleeding face and unsteady steps, and his white

breeches all stained and dabbled with his fall.

‘Why, where’s your hat, old chap?’ cried Brand.

‘Oh! bother my hat—it’s lost,’ said Romilly.

‘I say, shan’t I give you a leg-up? You look uncommonly queer, by Jove! Can you do it?’ this as Romilly prepared to mount.

‘Well,’ said Romilly, leaning against his horse’s shoulder, ‘if you’ll just help me up, like a good fellow. I got a nasty blow on the head, that’s what it is. Went under a tree, you know, trying to steer clear of the child.’

‘One of those precious little Worsleys, I suppose,’ said his cousin, dismounting; ‘they’re the rummiest children I ever saw in my life. But, I say, it might have killed you, you know.’

‘Oh! I wish it had,’ Romilly murmured faintly, as his stalwart kinsman heaved him into his saddle.

‘I don’t believe you can stick on now,’ said Jim apprehensively, pausing with one foot in his stirrup, and looking with anxiety at Romilly’s stooping figure and ashy face ; then he swung himself up. ‘I’ll tell you what, you’ll come round to the King’s Head and wash your face and have some brandy. You’re faint, you know ;’ and they rode slowly down the fields towards the village, Romilly growing momentarily more grey and helpless, Brand riding close beside him, with a hand nervously ready to clutch the bridle of the rider if necessary, and freely damning the length of way that lay between them and help.

At the King’s Head Brand found one of Sir John Romilly’s grooms, and sent

him home on Romilly's horse, with orders to come back with a dogcart in about half no time, and bring a hat and greatcoat with him for his young master.

Jim then took Romilly into the bar-parlour, and swore away his anxiety and impatience till brandy and hot water were brought in.

'Now the cart can't be here for another hour,' said Brand, looking at his watch; 'I advise you to bathe your face and just put yourself down on that sofa till it comes.'

Romilly took this advice, and lay silent a little while afterwards with closed eyes, his head bound up with Brand's silk neckerchief.

'Jim,' said he rather suddenly, when the other thought he was asleep.

'Lewis,' responded Jim.

‘ You know the Worsleys, do you?’

‘ Why, rather,’ was the prompt reply.

‘ They’re tenants of ours.’

‘ Oh! That was the house, then—that little white house, with all the greenery about it? How odd!’

‘ You’d find it a precious deal odder if you knew them, I can tell you,’ laughed Jim.

‘ Oh! I was thinking how often I have passed it along the road, or hunted across those fields, without a glimmering that Miss Wor—ahem! ahem! What a vile odour of stale tobacco poisons this place! Can’t we have a window open?’

Brand opened a window, talking as he did so.

‘ Why, do you know Miss Worsley? The one they call Ella? Where the devil did you meet her, if not here?’

‘Up in London, of course,’ said Romilly impatiently. ‘But tell me, Jim—she is engaged, is she, to Barry—Richard Barry the stockbroker?’

‘Yes, I know she is ; but it’s kept rather quiet at present—some fad of her father’s, I suppose.’

‘You seem pretty intimate with them,’ remarked Romilly, fixing his eyes on Brand’s ingenuous face.

‘You don’t seem best pleased at the idea, old boy,’ said Jim, with rather a puzzled smile. ‘I know I wish I were still more intimate with them. Pooh ! I’m not ashamed of it, even if I fail,’ he added, interrupting himself. ‘Since you’re so jolly curious about them, I may as well tell you privately that I’ve an idea of persuading Miss Janet to come out to the States with me. It takes about a month to catch her alone, and

then, ten to one she laughs in my face and runs away; but I don't give in yet.'

'I saw her once last spring in Sunley Woods with the rest,' said Romilly; 'and nearly died of trying not to laugh at her and a little red-haired lad — Jack, the brother.'

'Well, you'll have to renew the acquaintance now, you know, whether you like it or not,' said Brand, laughing.

'Indeed, I propose to steer precious clear of doing anything of the kind,' Romilly broke out.

Jim coloured furiously, and looked hurt.

'My dear old chap,' exclaimed Romilly, 'I wish you success; and I believe if you can win Janet, you'll have the best wife in the world—but one. I forgot how it would sound to you. Jim, when I came

back to England a week ago, it was with the firm resolve to find Ella Worsley, and ask her to be my wife. There! I never thought to tell anyone; but, you see, my ill-luck hasn't done with me yet. What a meeting!—to ride over the little one, and then nearly frighten her out of her wits with the sight of my broken head! And to find that Barry—Barry of all men—has won what I—you know, Jim, it's rather hard on a fellow.'

'Beastly hard lines!' assented Jim, feeling from the other's tone that it would not be well to express himself more sympathetically. 'But even then, you know, you must ask after them to-morrow if you're fit to ride round. You can't—upon my word, Lewis, really you can't ride over people's children like that, and never go near them to apologize, and find out what

harm you've done. It isn't the thing, you know.'

'Well,' said Romilly, 'I only bargain that you come with me, old man; so you'd better lunch with us to-morrow, and we'll ride round afterwards.'

'Here's the cart,' said Jim, looking out of window; and they went out.

Jim gave his cousin a hand up, tucked the rug round him, and then mounted his own animal, and rode alongside, until their ways parted.

Barry, meanwhile, had carried Madge indoors, and put her on the sofa in the drawing-room; and there Ella ascertained that the arm was only badly bruised, and the skin scratched in one or two places, but no great harm done.

'And you have lost all your pleasure,' said she ruefully, looking up at her lover,

as she at last found leisure to think of him.

‘More than you know,’ said Barry bitterly, turning one of Madge’s yellow curls round his finger.

‘Well, at any rate, you must have some luncheon,’ Ella went on. ‘Food consoles the male sex for all the ills of life ;’ and she laughed resignedly, as if a certain amount of bantering cheerfulness were part of her duty now, although it did not flow very spontaneously.

But Barry would not touch anything, and added that he had a train to catch, and could not stay.

‘But will you come with me as far as the fence where I left my horse?’ he said, avoiding her eyes, and nervously rapping at his boots with his hunting-crop. ‘Now, Ella,’ said he, when they were alone

in the field, 'I put truth above everything. I am going to ask you a question ; and, by all you hope for, give me a plain answer.'

Ella might well turn a shade paler, for the trouble in his voice was not good to hear.

'I can't varnish things, or put them poetically,' he went on. 'I may wound your feelings—I wouldn't do it for any less cause—you know that. But now, trust me—you *can* trust me, I suppose?'

'Yes—oh yes !' murmured Ella.

'I am much older than you, and you needn't be afraid, for whatever happens I can't be angry with you ; I shall love you as long as I live. It isn't your fault if you can't love me. If I cared less for you, perhaps I should not have seen what I saw just now. Tell me truly now—here, give

me your hands, and look me in the face—you love Lewis Romilly?’

Alas! It did not need her shame-stricken, barely audible ‘Yes’ to tell him it was true.

Long before, when he had stood by and heard Romilly offer to be her escort on her homeward journey from London, there had gone through his soul a bitter, nameless pang. That scene had come back to him this morning, and, as then, his face had grown dark; but this time the pain was sharper, and he well knew whence it was. Ella, even were his ring on her hand and her life given up to his keeping, was never, never to be his.

Strange that this man, with the rough unpolished manners and blunt speech, so slow to adapt himself to other ways and habits than those of his own business life,

should have been the first to feel the vibration from the nearer hovering wings of fate! What is the abyss between the heart and brain that it should take so long to bridge? He had felt it at the very outset; he knew it only now.

‘Why did you not tell me, Ella?’ he began, still holding her hands fast, for he knew it was the last time.

‘Oh! How could I?’ she broke out, crying bitterly. ‘It was a terrible mistake—a wicked, dreadful thing. I hoped none would ever know it but myself. I thought I had got over it. I hoped I would forget it with you; for it was all my own foolish fault. I didn’t know he was a married man; but he never gave me the faintest excuse—never. Partly Aunt Alicia told me about you, too; but she never said the name, and I thought she meant him, and

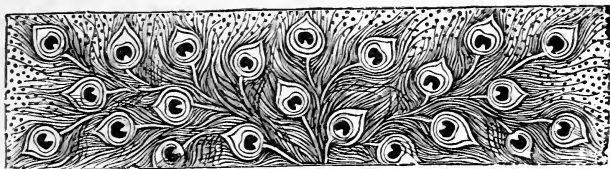
still I did not know it at all, till it was too late.'

'You poor child!' uttered Barry, sadly and kindly. 'Thank God this has come in time to save us from lifelong unhappiness. I cannot take you so, Ella, even if you fancy it would save you; and although—although I hardly know how to go back to my old life without any hope of you. See now, don't cry,' for at his kind words she cried more bitterly, and was nearer loving him then than ever she had been. 'Don't cry; we will be good friends always, and whenever you want help you shall come to me.'

He had rapidly debated with himself whether or not to tell her that Romilly was free, but he said, 'No; if he loves her, *he* will tell her; if not, why time may fight on my side, and she may yet come back to me;'

so he said nothing about it. 'I am too proud to take what isn't fairly mine,' said he, untwisting the bridle from the fence, however badly I want it. Good-bye!' he put his foot in the stirrup, but turned yet again and caught her a moment to his heart, while she lifted her wet face for his first and last kiss. 'Good-bye! God bless you, poor child!' he whispered, and then he mounted and rode away.





CHAPTER VI.

‘Quoi ! traiter un amant de la sorte, et un amant le plus fidèle et le plus passionné de tous les amants !

‘C’est une chose épouvantable que ce qu’on nous fait à tous deux.’—*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

ELLA stood crying where Barry had left her, wishing nothing so much as that the earth would open and draw her down into eternal darkness and silence, if so she might only be hidden from herself and from the world and be forgotten—be as if she had never been.

Dimly through her tears she watched him ride down the edge of the field, by the

way that Brand and Romilly had gone, and longed to cry after him to turn and come back to her and she would love him—would try to love him yet. But the words contradicted themselves almost before they took order in her mind, and her heart sank back upon itself, lonely, filled to overflowing with grief and shame; grief for the manly heart whose peace she had broken, and whose happiness she had marred; shame for the unhappy cause of his unhappiness and hers. She had, however, no time to brood over her misery, for the washing was not half done, the dinner-table not laid, the children not tidied up. Whether she was in the mood or not she must dry her eyes and go in and face them all, and tell them—yes, of course, they must be told at once—that her engagement was at an end, and Barry gone to return no more.

And then the reason ; naturally they would want some explanation, and Ella felt that she must pour the whole melancholy story into Mrs. Worsley's sympathetic ear, and leave her then to frame plausible excuses for her to the rest of the family.

A thousand things passed through her mind as she went slowly home ; she felt a wild wish to see Barry again and tell him more of it, tell him how it had come about, so far as she herself knew, and all the struggles she had passed through in bringing herself to accept him. She longed to hear him say again, ' Poor child ! ' and assure her once more that he would think no ill of her, but love her as long as he lived, whatever happened. Here was at least a strong spar to cling to in the wreck of love and life.

It crossed her mind, too, as the recollec-

tion of that sudden vision of Romilly flashed upon her mental eyes, how would he not despise her—perhaps even hate her (for surely she despised and hated herself) if he knew it; then came the thought, perhaps, since it had been so patent to Barry in that fatal moment, Mr. Romilly himself might have read her soul, suddenly unveiled and bared as when a flash of lightning pierces thick darkness, and in an instant all that lies hidden there yields up its secretness and stands revealed.

She went up to Mrs. Worsley's room without giving herself time for pros and cons, and there, with many tears, she told her whole story to her astonished and well-nigh incredulous stepmother.

The Worsleys, who read nothing in newspapers except reviews and leading articles, and who knew no one and cared nothing

for gossip, had naturally never heard that Romilly's undesirable wife was dead.

Mrs. Worsley therefore said to herself, 'This will come right in time. Mr. Barry will not think of anybody else. Ella, of course, will get over this unfortunate mistake, and as she grows a little older and wiser, she will come to feel that her true happiness lies with Mr. Barry.

'What *will* papa say?' Ella asked, choking down a sob and making a great effort to be calm.

'Well, dear, we needn't tell him all that you have told me,' said Mrs. Worsley soothingly. 'I'll tell him so that he shall not think of asking questions. To speak the truth, I don't think he will mind very much; he rather grudged parting with you yet.'

Ella sighed deeply, and felt it was high time to go down to the washing.

‘I think, do you know, that it will all come right,’ said Mrs. Worsley; ‘only it will take time, of course.’

‘Come right?’ repeated Ella in astonishment, thinking of Romilly. ‘How can it possibly?’

‘Because I think you already care much more for Mr. Barry than you think you do, and you have too much sense and good feeling to allow yourself to dwell on any thoughts of Mr. Romilly.’

‘Oh!’ uttered Ella, covering her face with her hands, and hiding it on the pillow, ‘I would to heaven I could forget him altogether! I don’t want to think of him. I thought I had quite got over it, mamma—I really did. It isn’t that I think of him or dream of fretting about him one bit—only

he stands between me and any other love, and I can't—I *can't* pass him or escape. Do you understand?

She looked up with a world of trouble in her eyes, and Mrs. Worsley rather vindictively wished she could just see the man who had done all this mischief.

‘It is all very well, Ella dear, for you to declare that he never gave you any excuse for falling in love with him,’ she said, feeling convinced that Romilly was a good-for-nothing fellow, and rather jumping at the idea and the opportuneness with which it came, ‘but you will not make me believe it. With his wife at a distance—a wife, probably, for whom he does not care—feeling a certain safety for himself in the knowledge that he was a married man, and being thrown constantly in the company of a pretty girl like you, what more likely than

that he has indulged himself by playing upon you—an instrument that responded only too readily to his touch ?’

‘Self-indulgence and Mr. Romilly are not to be named in the same breath,’ said Ella, interrupting.

‘It was flattering for the moment to his self-love, and helped him perhaps to forget his own troubles—quite enough, I, assure you, to make him go any length,’ pursued Mrs. Worsley confidently. ‘Oh, you don’t know the selfishness of a man !’

‘You don’t know Mr. Romilly,’ was all Ella said, with a faint proud smile as she kissed the thin face on the pillows, and then the little dark, downy thing that lay softly snoring away the dawn of life amongst the blankets. ‘I must go down and boil the rice, or poor Janet will be in a frenzy;’ and so saying Ella went away

feeling a degree less miserable. And when the others saw that she had been crying they thought it was only because she had been saying good-bye to her lover, and Janet was a little surprised at her caring so much.

Madge, with her bruised arm in a sling, sat opposite to her at dinner, and gazed for some time at her tell-tale face.

‘That gentleman was very kind to you, Ella,’ she remarked, nodding. ‘He said, “*Ella, darling,*” and stroked your hair.’

Jack roared with laughter at these disclosures, and patted Madge on the back.

‘Go on, Madge!’ said he. ‘What else?’

‘No, no; be quiet, Madge!’ said Janet; ‘don’t talk about what doesn’t concern you.’

‘Why did he fill his hat with water?’ Madge went on presently. ‘And do you

know, he forgot to say his prayers this morning.'

'You're drivelling, Madge,' said Janet contemptuously. 'Get on with your dinner.'

'Did he really fill his hat with water?' asked Gog, shivering with delight at the luxurious notion.

'Yes,' said Madge importantly; 'it was *his* hat, you know, but he told the other gentleman to dip it in the ditch.'

'I wish I was a big man!' uttered Gog, forgetting his dinner; 'and what did they do with the water?'

'He dipped his handkerchief into it,' said Madge, rolling her eyes, 'a clean handkerchief, and washed his face with the dirty water.'

All the children uttered an exclamation of delight.

‘And he had white bags on,’ Madge continued triumphantly, ‘and they were *covered* with mud.’

‘How awfully jolly!’ breathed Gog, looking quite solemn and thoughtful as he dimly felt what a measureless abyss of time lay between him and the attainment of such delicious freedom.

‘What *does* she mean?’ asked Janet, glancing at Ella, who, however, appeared absorbed in feeding Lottie. ‘Were there two gentlemen then, you vague little donkey?’

Madge opened her eyes wide. ‘Yes,’ said she, ‘two gentlemen in red coats—soldiers, I think.’

‘Soldiers!’ uttered Sidney scoffingly. ‘You silly girl!’

‘Go on, Madge—was one of them the gentleman who carried you in?’

‘Yes,’ said Madge; ‘he poured the water over Ella, after the other gentleman had washed his face.’

Great sensation amongst the children, and they glanced at one another with dancing eyes which said, ‘We must discuss this more fully in private.’

‘I wouldn’t marry such a horrid man,’ said Stella gravely.

‘It wasn’t his fault,’ retorted Madge, who had taken a fancy to Barry. ‘The old gentleman told him to do it.’

‘Old, was he?’ said Janet. ‘What do you mean by old? What was he like?’

‘Very thin, like papa,’ said Madge; ‘and his hands went like this’—she shook her hands violently about over her plate and knocked down a mug of water—‘and his hair was grey, and his face all bleeding.’

‘Oh, then it was the man who fell off his horse!’ said Janet. ‘What became of him, you incoherent little gaby?’

‘After he’d stroked Ella’s hair, and said his prayers, and washed his face——’

‘She’s jumbling them together,’ said Janet contemptuously. ‘Well, go on—tell it your own muddle-headed way!’

‘He tied the horse to the wire fence and went away,’ said Madge, ‘and he left his hat in our field with the water in it.’

Sidney, Nora, and Gog exchanged meaning glances at this, and began to hurry over their dinner.

‘I wonder who it was,’ mused Janet. ‘You didn’t see him, Ella, I suppose?’

‘No,’ said Madge, answering for her, ‘because just when he was coming to see if I was killed, Ella fainted.’

Over the wash-tubs after dinner Ella

found herself constrained to tell Janet what had happened; and Janet hotly declared that Romilly was a villain and that she hated him, and that Barry was worth fifty such, and Ella ought to write to him and say she repented of her folly. But Ella shook her head.

‘Ah! no, Janet,’ said she mournfully, ‘you shall marry and be happy ever after, and I will stay and do the work at home. They’ll want a servant and a governess as long as the children are too young to work for themselves.’

The next afternoon, just as the washing-up was done and the girls were settling down to the ironing of the clean clothes, there came a tremendous knock on the front-door.

They looked at each other and at their dresses, and Janet stole across the passage

into the study to peep very cautiously through the window and see who was there.

‘It’s Mr. Brand and another gentleman,’ said she in a whisper, coming back on tip-toe, ‘most likely Mr. Romilly. He shan’t enter this house, Ella.’

‘Oh! no, no; don’t let him in,’ murmured Ella. ‘I don’t want to see him.’

‘They’ve come to inquire after you and Madge, of course; and perhaps that scoundrel wants his hat, which he can have. Meanwhile we are not at home. Where’s Jack?’

‘He’s gone down the village, you know,’ said Ella. ‘Who is to go to the door?’

‘Oh! we’ll send Stella—she’s sure to be reading under a table somewhere,’ said Janet; and the two girls went to look for Stella.

Just as a second knock startled the echoes of the house they found her behind the sofa in the drawing-room, deep in a volume of 'Cameos from English History.'

'Now, Stella, get up quick!—you've got to answer the door,' said Ella. 'Come here and let me make your hair a little less like a haystack.'

'You're to say we're not at home, do you see?' said Janet, taking her by the shoulder and holding up a warning finger. 'Mind you say that—we're none of us at home.'

'But will it be true?' objected Stella.

'Yes—it means, you know, that we don't want to see them. We don't wish to let in Mr. Romilly because he is a villain, you know. If Mr. Brand comes alone, well and good; but Mr. Romilly shall never set foot in this house. Do you see?'

Stella nodded wisely.

‘So we’re going to hide, and you’ve got to go and say we’re not at home, and don’t let them in on any account. Run—there goes the knocker again!’

Stella hurried to the door, and the girls stood with beating hearts in the kitchen waiting till she should come back.

‘Please, they say they’re not at home,’ said Stella, opening the door cautiously about six inches, and thrusting out her head to observe the intruders.

‘How d’ye do, Stella?’ said Brand cheerfully. ‘Open the door, and don’t talk nonsense. This is my cousin, Mr. Romilly; shake hands with him.’

Stella opened the door a little more, and pushed her shock of golden hair back from her face with both hands; but at this invitation she drew back a step.

‘No, I’d rather not,’ she said decidedly.

‘Rather not!’ echoed Brand; ‘why not?’

‘Janet says Mr. Romilly is a villain of the deepest dye,’ replied Stella, embroidering the statement a little, ‘and he is never to enter this house. So please, are you going now?’

‘No, we’re not going,’ said Brand, laughing; ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about. Let us in—you’ll see it’s all right.’

‘You remind me,’ observed Stella with her natural pomposity of manner, and perfectly calmly, ‘of the wolf who tried to deceive the little kids by putting flour on his ugly paws, and swallowing chalk to soften his great rough voice. Perhaps you have not read that story?’

Brand looked at Romilly and laughed.

‘No,’ said he; ‘our education has been sadly neglected in that department. But if

you'll let us in, you know, you might read it to us.'

'I'm not to let you in on any account,' said Stella firmly; 'but I can lend you the book in English or in German—which-ever you prefer. It is by the Brothers Grimm.'

'Hang it, I say!' uttered Brand politely. 'Go and ask Miss Janet if she's quite sure she's not at home.'

Stella opened her grave blue eyes very wide, and thought for a moment.

'Janet said if you liked to come alone, well and good,' said she; 'but they wouldn't see Mr.—Mr. Romilly.'

Romilly felt a little hurt and annoyed.

'Well, we must leave our cards, then,' said he, half to Brand; 'we came to ask after the little girl who was hurt yesterday, your little sister—how is she?'

‘Quite well, thank you,’ replied Stella, as a matter of course.

‘And is your eldest sister quite well?’ Romilly asked, as he gave her his card; ‘she was rather upset yesterday.’

‘No, it was Madge who was upset,’ remarked Stella, in her curious matter-of-fact way. ‘Ella cried a good deal, but she looks quite right to-day. We think it was because that rude man spilt the water over her, you know.’

‘Why, it was the best thing he could do, poor fellow,’ said Romilly, with a smile; and added, in an audible aside to Brand, ‘The child doesn’t know what she is talking about, Jim.’

‘I do!’ said Stella angrily; ‘it was that Mr. Barry who did it, though Madge says the other gentleman put him up to it and then ran away, which we all think was

horribly mean of him—only, of course, as Ella fainted, she didn't see that; and Madge rigmarolled and mixed it all up so, that Ella didn't believe a word she said. But I know,' Stella went on in vindication of her character—'I know all about it; Ella is never going to marry him now, *never*, and we are never to speak of him again.'

'Jim,' said Romilly, with nervous impatience, 'give her your card, I say, and a message, and come away. We can't stand parleying here till nightfall.'

But Jim felt quite at home, and was looking curiously at Stella.

'I say, Stella, are you sure you're not wandering in your mind?' said he, and Romilly walked away towards the gate.

'*Stella!*' came a stentorian whisper round the corner of the passage, '*shut that door!*'

It was Janet's voice.

Brand instinctively put his foot a little way across the threshold, and held Stella fast by one wrist.

'Look here, Stella, *I'm* not a villain, you know,' he urged, speaking low. 'Are you *sure* that is true about Mr. Barry?'

'Janet told us last night that Ella had changed her mind about him,' answered Stella, trying to free herself, 'and the first one of us that mentions him is to pick up a whole barrowful of stones off the field for nothing—we generally get twopence. Leave go of me, Mr. Brand!'

'Oh! I say, I'm sure I've heard Miss Janet tell you that is bad grammar,' said Brand, laughing and holding her fast.

'Well, you'd never have known it if you hadn't heard her,' said Stella, with a

wriggle. 'You talk bad grammar yourself.'

'Who told you that?' laughed Brand.

'I've heard you,' said Stella; 'you use two negatives instead of one.'

'Did Miss Janet say so?' asked he, laughing still.

'Yes; and besides, I've often heard you.'

'Well, tell Miss Janet she has given me so many that I'm obliged to use two at a time, or I should never finish them up—will you tell her that?'

'I'll bite you if you don't let me go this minute, Mr. Brand!' cried Stella angrily; and as she proceeded to carry out her threat all her yellow hair fell over his sleeve, there was a tussle, a little scream, an abrupt 'Oh! by Jove!' from Brand; the door suddenly shut with a bang, and Brand ran down the drive and joined Romilly outside

the gates, holding his hand with a very rueful face, for it bore the pattern of Stella's vicious little teeth.

'Come, you've got the worst of it this time,' said Romilly, as they retired together down the road, somewhat baffled and crest-fallen. 'You raised the siege pretty sharply.'

Brand showed his hand, already turning red and blue. 'Serve you right for your impertinence!' said Romilly.

'On the whole, I should say you came off about as badly as I did,' observed Brand, laughing. 'You heard a few home-truths my friend, I must say; not much disguise or mincing of matters about Miss Stella, is there?'

'My ears are tingling still,' said Romilly; 'but, in the long-run, I'd always rather hear the truth.'

‘But what bosh, I say!’ exclaimed Brand, pondering over the whole scene from the beginning. ‘What the devil could she have meant about your being a villain—a villain of the deepest dye, too! Rather strong, Lewis, for a fellow of your stamp!’

‘I know Miss Worsley thought very badly of me when I last saw her, early in the summer, for she wouldn’t even shake hands,’ said Romilly. ‘I think she must have been reading some of those confounded papers that make capital out of the sin and sorrow of mankind; and naturally she would believe some of it. Dirt sticks, wherever you throw it; besides, it was mostly true.’

‘I’ll soon disabuse her of any ideas of that sort!’ exclaimed Brand with energy. ‘Don’t let me hear any more of that d——

nonsense, Lewis! True, indeed! If I'd the horsewhipping of a few of those pitiful scoundrels of scandalmongers, I can tell you they wouldn't come off with much of their skins !'

'Pooh!' said Romilly disdainfully. 'Let worms crawl in their natural mud. I pity them, now that my annoyance has cooled.'

'H'm!' snorted Brand wrathfully; 'perhaps you'd pity them more if they got their deserts.'

'Do you suppose that great yellow-haired child really knew what she was talking about?' asked Romilly presently.

'What, about Barry?' said Brand. 'Yes, I suspect she did. What's more to the point, I made her confirm what she had said, and she told me they were——'

'Brand,' interrupted Romilly, 'I don't like taking advantage of the child; of

course she wasn't meant to chatter like that to us ; it isn't fair.'

'Stuff!' cried Brand. 'If all those children may be told, I declare it's no secret from anybody. I'm morally certain the whole thing's off and over. There must have been some quarrel yesterday. I don't know Barry well, or I'd ask him like a shot.'

'Of course I should desperately like to know how it really does stand,' sighed Romilly ; 'but even if it is off for the time, of course it will be made up again. They hadn't time for a serious quarrel.'

'Now, Lewis,' said Brand, pulling his yellow beard, and looking shy and very serious, 'I'm going to do an heroic thing for your sake ; I'll go and propose to Miss Janet to-morrow, and if she accepts me I shall not hesitate to ask as many imper-

tinent questions as you would like answered.'

'But if she refuses, you won't be able to go there again,' objected the other, not altogether disliking the plan.

'Oh yes, I shall,' laughed Brand. 'You don't know me, old chap. I admit, it won't be so pleasant just at first; but I don't give up for a few trifling rebuffs of that sort.'

'You've a jolly enviable temperament,' laughed Romilly, looking at his serene fair face, handsome in its cheerful tranquillity of manly strength.

'Even if she does refuse me, and I shall argue a precious long time before I give in,' said Brand, 'I shall still speak my mind freely about you.'

'No, no; don't say anything about me,' hastily interposed Romilly. 'Why, what on earth would you propose to say?'

‘Never you mind,’ said Brand calmly; ‘leave it to me.’

Meanwhile Stella was being called to account by her sisters, as they sprinkled and folded the linen ready for ironing.

First they examined the cards, and Ella dropped Romilly’s into the fire without a word.

‘What made you stand there hawering such an awful time?’ asked Janet. ‘Didn’t you say we were not at home?’

‘Yes, I did; and then Mr. Brand began to bother, and tried to make me shake hands with Mr. Romilly, but I wouldn’t.’

‘Why not, pray?’ asked Janet.

‘You said he was a villain of the deepest dye,’ replied Stella innocently, ‘and so I told him that, and said that you would see Mr. Brand any day, but that Mr. Romilly was never to set foot in this house.’

‘ You egregious simpleton, Stella !’ uttered Janet stonily, turning a despairing eye on Ella. ‘ You never really said all that ?’

Stella hung her head, and felt it would be best to reveal no more than was elicited by direct questions.

‘ And what made Mr. Brand yell out just before the door banged ?’ demanded Ella.

Silence and deep confusion on Stella’s part.

‘ Why did he call out “ Oh ! by Jove ! ” ?’ repeated Ella.

‘ I bit his hand,’ mumbled Stella almost inaudibly.

‘ Good heavens !’ shrieked the girls. ‘ This comes of sending a genius to the door. Why on earth did you bite him ?’

‘To make him go,’ Stella articulated faintly.

The girls went into hysterical fits of laughter, and Stella vanished promptly, and was not seen again that afternoon.





CHAPTER VII.

‘The past—the future—all that Fate
Can bring of dark or desperate
Around such hours, but makes them cast
Intenser radiance while they last!’

MOORE.

‘**H**ULLO!’ said Jack the next morning, poking his head in at the back-kitchen door.

‘Here’s Brand coming to tell us how his hand is. Are you at home, any of you?’

‘Is he alone?’ demanded Janet sternly, for since the affair in the field and the revelations about Romilly, she felt it her duty to protect Ella.

‘ Yes ; shall I show him in here ? ’

‘ Really, Jack, when I’m plucking this goose, and my apron as black as your hand ! Don’t be a—ahem ! ’

Brand was already standing at the door looking in over Jack’s tabby cap, and completed her sentence for her with a string of suggestions.

‘ Fool, ape, ass, gaby ? What is the affectionate word you want, Miss Janet ? Pray don’t move,’ as she was about to rise from the empty beer-barrel on which she was sitting. ‘ I’ve several things to say to you, Miss Janet, if we may dispense with Jack’s company, and you can attend to me as well as to your work.’

Jack slammed the door at which he was standing, and then ran round officiously and slammed the other one which divided the scullery from the front kitchen ; and

Brand sat down on the boot-board amongst the blacking-pots, and stuck his hands into his pockets, while Janet laboriously tweaked the feathers out of a very scraggy goose, and the down floated about and settled on their clothes and hair.

Brand crossed his feet and looked up at the cobwebs among the rafters over his head; he uncrossed them, pulled his beard, and looked at Janet, who worked steadily, and kept her eyes fixed on what she was about. He had thought of some score of ways of putting what he wanted to say, but now that he was face to face with Janet, and the doors shut upon them, he felt that matters were different. Janet was not quite such a passive, receptive being as she seemed to him when in the middle of the night he had rehearsed this scene; he had forgotten to imagine that

curious little ghost of a satirical smile that hovered about the corners of her mouth, and that calm expression of critical penetration that reigned on her broad brow and made him incline to defer as long as possible the moment when she would raise her eyes and look him through and through.

Janet herself, while wishing to pretend that she thought he had come on business—some unpleasantness about the constant trespassing of the Worsley live-stock, or marauding of the mastiffs—felt her heart beating so violently that she dared not trust herself to open the conversation, or ask him what he wanted.

A sound of children's voices nearing the outer door suddenly precipitated Brand's hazy resolution; his hands went deeper into his pockets, and his eyes came down from the cobwebbed chinks over his head,

and refusing to look at Janet as he wanted them to, fixed themselves upon his own feet.

‘Miss Janet,’ said he, hastily giving himself not another moment, ‘if I sit here till doomsday I shan’t be able to think of a decent way of putting it. I’ve been trying for months, only the sight of you always drives everything out of my head.’ He paused and furtively raised his eyes, but Janet appeared quite calm. ‘And you see,’ he went on, feeling somehow that his case was not altogether desperate—‘you see you have never given me a fair chance ; you always run away, or laugh, or set the dogs at me.’

Janet’s embarrassment found vent in a little explosion of laughter, and the feathers flew all over the place.

‘Now, don’t, Miss Janet,’ urged Brand,

and he rose to his feet and came and stood over her. 'Will you give me a decided answer now to a plain question? I want you to be my wife, and come out with me to the States. You can work as much as you like out there, only I would see you didn't do too much—that is, if you could care for me.'

Janet said nothing.

'Oh, Miss Janet!' he urged, bending down to take away the work she pretended to be so absorbed in; but Janet held it fast while she looked up.

'Well,' said she composedly, though her eyes were dancing with mischief, 'what now, Mr. Brand? I thought you wanted me to answer a question? You haven't asked one.'

'Is that all?' said Brand, waxing masterful, and taking her two wrists in his so

that she could not go on with her pretence of work. 'Look me in the face, then, and answer me. Can you care for a plain, stupid fellow like me?'

'That's rather difficult to answer,' interrupted Janet, the colour dyeing her face for all that she laughed so lightly. 'I don't know any plain, stupid fellow like you, or I dare say I might contrive to care for him.'

'Look here,' said Brand desperately; 'I'm in earnest, Janet. I don't like this nonsense. Will you marry me or not?'

'I hardly like to say until I am sure that I have been asked,' faltered Janet. 'It isn't the proper thing.'

'Much you care for the proper thing!' exclaimed Brand indignantly.

He had held her wrists so firmly that she had risen to her feet, and they now

stood face to face in a sea of feathers, the half-plucked goose lying on the brick floor between them.

‘Is there anything besides grammar and logic, I wonder, that you do care for?’

Janet looked up.

‘One thing,’ she murmured faintly.

‘And what may that be?’ demanded the unsuspecting Brand, prepared to be teased, whatever she said.

‘Why you, of course, gaby!’ was the rude reply; but she presumably meant it for affection, for at the same moment, as he released her hands, she threw her arms round his neck and hid her laughing face somewhere amongst the folds of his coat.

‘Oh, Jim! you jolly old idiot! What on earth makes you care for me?’ she asked presently, looking up; and as he promptly seized the opportunity and kissed her, he

saw tears nearly drowning the laughter in her eyes.

‘Look here,’ said he seriously, ‘if you love me, Janet, there’s no occasion to call me names like those, even if it does seem to make me more one of yourselves. Give me a kiss, and then I’ve some more important things to say.’

‘Well, go on,’ said Janet, about five minutes later. ‘How you do waste the precious time!’

‘Well, come round the field, or the garden, or somewhere,’ said Brand; ‘I don’t altogether care for these feathers all over me, nor for the smell of blacking, and washing-up, and so forth, which seems to pervade this place.’

So they went away round the orchard together, and Brand began cautiously:

‘Do you know that Stella gave us a

whole lot of information at the door yesterday—things perhaps that she oughtn't to have told ?'

'I hope you've made a point of forgetting them, then,' said Janet.

'That's easier said than done,' he answered. 'Tell me one thing, Janet—is your sister's engagement to Mr. Barry broken off?'

'Yes, I'm sorry to say it is,' replied Janet; 'all the more sorry now that I am perhaps going to be tolerably happy myself. I only hope it may all come right in time, though Ella seems quite sure it never can.'

'Why?' asked Jim. 'What makes her so sure? What made them break it off so suddenly?'

'That I'm not going to tell you,' said the loyal Janet; 'and I may as well

mention at once, Jim, that if you expect me to betray other people's secrets to you either now or when I'm your wife, you'd better give me up at once, for I shall never do it.'

'All right,' said Jim; 'I don't want you to; I didn't know it was a secret. But, I say,' he went on, as he gave the subject another turn in his mind, 'does she care for Barry? I suppose you may tell me that?'

'I will, if you will tell me why you are so exceedingly curious, Jim,' said Janet, looking at him suspiciously.

Jim actually blushed.

'Oh! but I can't betray other people's secrets, you know, Janet; you really wouldn't wish me to,' he stammered.

'Other people's secrets!' repeated Janet, standing still, and transfixing him with her

penetrating eye. 'And pray who may the "other people" be who take such an impertinent interest in our affairs?'

Jim felt that he had let the cat out of the bag, and an uneasy and fleeting smile vaguely illuminated his blushes as he saw what a ridiculous blunder he had made.

'You're too sharp for me,' he admitted helplessly. 'All I can do now is to tell you the whole thing under the seal of confession.'

'Oh yes!' interrupted Janet scornfully—'as it was told to you, I suppose!'

'No, no; upon my honour, Janet,' said poor Brand, 'it wasn't at all; only I hadn't meant to say anything about him—ahem! ahem!—I mean *it*—about it.'

'Is this supposed to be diplomacy and *finesse*, Jim?' demanded his lady-love com-

passionately ; ‘if so, it is really beneath contempt. You’d better make a clean breast of the whole matter. I won’t betray you—you poor helpless creature !’

Jim heaved a sigh of relief, and began to feel a little cooler.

‘After all,’ said he, ‘it is much better to tell the truth in the long-run.’

‘Yes,’ assented Janet, ‘especially if one cannot lie any better than you do. Now then, out with the truth, and let me hear what all this bungling was about.’

‘Well, it’s about Lewis Romilly,’ began Brand ; but Janet interrupted him at once.

‘You needn’t trouble your head about him as far as we are concerned,’ she exclaimed. ‘We don’t want to see him or know him. We hate him.’

‘That’s the most woman-headed thing

I've heard you say. How can you hate a man you don't know ?'

'His own misdoings have made him notorious,' replied Janet, vaguely conscious that she did not quite know what he had done.

'Well, but listen to me first,' said Brand. 'You can't tell me anything against him that I can't flatly deny.'

'You'll tell me, then, that he didn't marry a horrid actress and abandon her, and come home and pose as an unmarried man, and—and leave the consequences of his dishonourable conduct to be borne by innocent people ?'

'His conduct hurt no one but himself,' said Brand stoutly. 'A man may make a hundred mistakes without doing wrong—such wrong as you've a right to throw stones at him for. If his own people have

forgiven him, it is not your part to bear him ill-will ; he has not hurt you.'

'He has !' cried Janet ; 'and I will never forgive him.'

Brand stared.

'I don't understand you,' he said.

'Believe me, then. You think because his family have forgiven him, and he is restored to his position, and reinstalled in the good graces of society, by virtue, I suppose, of his future title and wealth, that therefore the mischief is undone. It is not undone, and it perhaps never can be ; and it has ruined the happiness of two people at least, and gone very far to ruin mine too.' With these last words, Janet gave a little sob. 'I can't and won't forgive him, and I don't want to hear his name.'

Brand looked very serious, and a good deal puzzled.

‘Well, but tell me—who are the two people whose happiness you say he has ruined? I say, I can’t stand it if you cry like that. Don’t cry—tell me who they are, my darling!’

He was very persuasive, and Janet was in a melting mood.

‘Ella, of course,’ she sobbed, ‘and—and Mr. Barry.’

‘My goodness!’ uttered Brand. ‘How has he done that?’

‘Because he is a villain,’ said Janet, drying her eyes. ‘I can’t tell you any more.’

‘Well, I’ll show you that you’re completely wrong,’ said Brand. ‘He has nothing more at heart than Ella’s happiness, for he told me himself that he was desperately in love with her, and came home last week from Switzerland for the

express purpose of asking her to be his wife.'

Janet stared this time. 'What has become of the other woman, then?' she asked.

'Other woman? What other woman?'

'His wife, idiot!'

'Hush!' said Brand. 'His wife is dead—been dead more than six months.'

Janet remained absorbed in thought for some time.

'Now you understand why it is so important to me to know whether Ella cares for Mr. Barry or not,' said Jim. 'If it is only what they call a lover's quarrel—some trifle—of course Romilly can't speak. But if it is serious, for heaven's sake give him his chance of happiness and let him do what he can; it is time he should be happy after the life he has had, poor fellow!'

Brand had made an admission, though

he did not know it; but Janet saw that Romilly, whatever he had said or done before he went abroad, must have fallen sufficiently in love with Ella to know without seeing her again that she was more to him than other women. It was a revelation to her, for although she had strenuously thrown all the blame upon the man, she had not in her secret heart felt at all convinced that any of it was his due, which, since she was a woman, had made her all the more severe. Now that she knew more, and saw more chance of his having offended, she was more inclined to be lenient.

‘Well, Jim,’ said she at last, ‘I never, myself, could see that Ella cared two straws for Mr. Barry. There! I shan’t say another word, if you ask a thousand questions.’

Jim looked as if a millstone had been

removed from his neck. 'I won't ask them, then,' said he happily; 'but—ahem!' (he always gave this little cough when he deviated from his natural openness), 'I should very much like to—to have a little talk with Ella. Let me see—can't you send her to the evening service at Hawbourne? It's at five o'clock.'

'Why, how do you know, you old heathen?'

'Because I found out ages ago that you sometimes went, and I've been there scores of times and never seen you,' laughed Brand.

'Well, if you only went to see me, it won't count, you know,' said Janet.

'Oh! but I got quite to like it,' said Brand simply.

Janet laughed. 'But I don't think, seriously, that you'd better talk about this

to Ella,' said she. 'Third parties should never interfere.'

'I promise not to interfere or mention the subject,' said Jim, 'if you'll undertake to send her to church to-night.'

'Well, she won't go alone, you know,' said Janet; 'she will take Stella——'

'Oh! not Stella!' interrupted Brand, in lively accents of disapproval.

'Well, Nora then.'

'Very well. Now, can I rely upon you, Janet?'

'If you doubt it, I'll have nothing more to do with you,' said Janet promptly; and it was about this moment that Goggie came running to Ella in the greenhouse to say that Janet was boxing Mr. Brand's ears in the field, and Hardigras was finishing up the goose in the back-yard.

'Nasty prosaic beast!' said Ella. 'A

very good riddance!’ and she looked discreetly through the glass between the geraniums and saw the two coming laughing up the field. She smiled and sighed at once, and tried to go on with her potting, saying to herself, ‘My dear old Janet is going to be very happy; what do I care now what becomes of me?’

To show how little she cared she then rubbed away a furtive tear, and presently threw down the trowel and went out round the house to meet them, and be told their happy story.

After Brand had left and they had gone up together and told Mrs. Worsley what had befallen, Janet, in a casual manner, suggested that as it was such a lovely day, and Ella had undergone a good deal lately, she might walk over to the evening service at Hawbourne. ‘You could take a child

or two with you,' said she, 'and then I shall know one or two of them are out of mischief.'

'But there'll be so much for you to do while I am gone,' objected Ella, evidently thinking it would be very pleasant.

'Oh! never mind,' said Janet happily; 'I feel fifty thousand strong thinking of that stupid old Jim. I'd much rather you went and had your nice walk and service, and left me to think in peace.'

Ella gave way, selected Nora and Madge for the privilege of an early tea with her at about four, and set off at a moderate pace so as not to hurry the children.

Very pretty they looked as they passed along the leaf-strewn path that skirted Mr. Brand's park-palings, and the slanting sunlight of the autumn afternoon shot through between the boughs and made rainbows on

their bright hair, and touched the folds of their faded gowns with tender, luminous curves of blue-green.

The solitary bell was still ringing in the turret as they entered the dim little church, and knelt in one of the free seats about half-way up the aisle.

Nora and Madge repeated their brief prayer and then sat up, one on each side of her; but Ella was still kneeling with her face hidden, when a slight, spare man, with a careworn face and grey hair, and blue-grey eyes that looked as if sorrow had quenched their early fire, entered the church, and went into a seat behind and to the right of them. He, too, knelt till the bell ceased, and the two clergy and three small choristers in surplices came in from the vestry and walked up the chancel without any music.

About a dozen people were scattered up and down the church; the devouter spirits, perhaps, of the Sunday congregation. Ella knew none of them except the Edens, but there was something in the low tones of a man's voice repeating the responses behind her that woke strange echoes in her heart.

It was Romilly, and the sweet peacefulness of the beautiful evening service came home to him with a tenfold power of soothing and of strengthening for knowing that she was so near, and that now, unless she willed it, nothing could part them any more. He had no book, and except when his face was hidden in prayer, his eyes never wandered from watching the three in front of him; and he thought how sweet the little girls looked with their golden hair—Madge's yellow, and Nora's ruddy like

Ella's—and their grave innocent faces ; their dress, too, though it was old and worn, was very neat, and the faded colour to his artist eye was lovelier than anything new could be.

But it was Ella's face, when she turned her head a little to look out through the diamond panes of the south window at the pale evening sky, that held him spell-bound.

How was it changed from the face he knew a few short months ago, so child-like in its light-hearted tranquillity ! Now the round cheek had a little faint hollow in it, the delicate colour was gone, the eyelid drooped a little, and an indefinable something in her attitude and manner told him she was changed, older, a woman now and not a child ; a woman, too, who had suffered and could be patient.

The church was quite empty when he rose and went out into the quiet evening air, with the words of the blessing lingering in his ears, 'The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you and give you peace,' and walked away down the hill in the long grey shadows of the hedgerow elms.

Some way before him he saw Ella, a child holding by either hand, walking fast—too fast, for the little girls kept breaking into a trot to keep up with her.

As she passed down the aisle she had seen the grey head that there was no mistaking, with its dark hair that would have been curly if it were not so very short, bowed down upon the thin hands; she knew in an instant who it was, and fled away as fast as she could urge the little ones to go without actually running, hoping

to be out of sight, or at least too far off for recognition and overtaking, before Romilly came out.

‘Miss Worsley,’ said the well-known voice as he came up and slackened his pace beside them, and the three then also dropped into a more reasonable walk, ‘am I still too much in disgrace to be permitted to ask after you and your little sister?’

Ella was very pale and scarcely raised her eyes, but she managed to say quietly that no harm was done.

‘And what have I done that cannot be forgiven?’ he asked, taking Madge’s little hand in his and showing no signs of retiring.

Ella did not answer; she could find no words, but only longed to implore him to go away.

‘I know,’ said Madge confidentially, looking up in his face—‘you’re the man that told Mr. Barry to empty the water over Ella; it wasn’t kind of you.’

‘Oh, but she knows better than to mind that!’ said Romilly, with a smile. ‘It must be something much worse.’

‘You’re the man that forgot to say his prayers,’ said Madge, shaking her head solemnly. ‘That was worse.’

Romilly smiled again rather sadly, but said nothing; he was waiting for Ella to speak.

‘You said “Ella, darling,”’ pursued the guileless Madge. ‘Oh, you hurt my hand!’

‘Did I?’ murmured Romilly; ‘I didn’t mean to.’

‘I thought at first you loved her very much?’ said Madge inquiringly.

‘So I do,’ answered Romilly, ‘but I am afraid she does not love me. Perhaps if you and your sister were to run on a little way, she would allow me to tell her a story.’

‘Oh! mayn’t we hear the story?’ cried both children eagerly.

‘No,’ said Romilly, ‘it’s a grown-up story;’ then to Ella, who still held Nora’s hand, ‘Will you let them run on?’

Ella dropped the little hand in silence, and Romilly stepped on to the narrow foot-path beside her.

‘Are you never going to forgive me?’ he said in a low voice, as the children trotted on.

Ella could not speak for a moment, and then she said desperately:

‘I have nothing to forgive, Mr. Romilly; only I wish you would be so kind as to

go away and—and never speak to me again.’

‘Is it then utterly impossible that you can care for me, Ella? am I so hateful to you? Was it altogether a sin that I loved you before I was free? At least I fled as soon as I knew what had befallen me, and I don’t think—you yourself shall tell me whether I ever betrayed myself by word or sign?’

‘Oh no!’ faltered Ella—‘never.’

‘And when I learned that the heavy burden I bore so ill was taken away, and when, after months of wandering—sick in body and mind—I have come home to seek you, daring to believe myself at last within reach of happiness, do you tell me, Ella, that it can never be? I don’t know what has come between us—you did not always hate me.’

Ella turned about and looked him in the face an instant without a word, and then her eyes fell.

‘And can’t you guess now what it was?’ she faltered, as the happy tears brimmed over.

‘Was it a sad story?’ asked Nora three minutes later, when her sister came up to them, her hand in Romilly’s and her cheeks all wet with unheeded tears.

Ella looked at him with a smile. ‘I think that story is always sad,’ she said, ‘but very happy too.’





CHAPTER VIII.

‘O Love ! O Life ! Late found, and soon, soon lost !
A bleak sunrise—a treacherous morning gleam—
And now, ere mid-day, all my sky is black
With whirling drifts once more.’

The Saint's Tragedy.

‘**U**PON my word, you two!’ laughed Worsley a few days later, when he came home and surveyed his blushing daughters. ‘You’ve been making hay in my absence.’

Soon afterwards the two young men drove up in a dogcart, for they knew the master was expected that day, and Jack brought them into the drawing-room

Brand had to be introduced to his future father-in-law, and had an opportunity, as Janet did not fail to remind him, of 'trying the feel of the evil eye,' and he admitted that he did not feel specially inclined to attack Worsley about the work he allowed his women to do ; he declared, however, that his ardour on the subject had only cooled because the girls had both found adequate protectors.

Ella brought in coffee, and the little girls walked about with cakes of Janet's making, pressing them upon everybody all the more urgently perhaps that they would have liked somebody to offer them something ; but it was not their tea-time, and asking for things was against the rules.

Stella was caught by Jim and made to find the mark on his hand, and nearly cried when he said he confidently expected to

have hydrophobia soon, in which case of course she would have to be shot, like other mad dogs.

Romilly talked to Worsley, following Ella with his eyes all the time, while Madge sat on his knee and tried to get his watch out of its pocket.

‘I’m going up to town almost directly,’ said Worsley. ‘I have work enough to keep me going for a year—pooh! a year?—half a dozen years.’

Romilly stole Ella’s hand as she passed him, and kissed it.

‘That’s] how he fills up the corners of his time,’ laughed Ella, apologizing for him.

‘Yes,’ said Romilly, ‘but I had something to say, I believe. Oh yes; couldn’t you come up to town too? Could you get that room that you had before?’

‘And what do you propose that I should do in town?’

‘Let us see London together,’ said Romilly, ‘to remind us of—of those studio days, last spring.’

‘Ah!’ quoted Ella rather sadly,

‘“Nature brings not back the mastodon,
Nor we those times;”

besides the fogs are coming on, and London will be anything but pleasant. You would only be disappointed. No, no; Janet and I have quantities of work to do, for her old idiot, as she calls him—we’ve all forgotten his proper name—insists on going out to the States in February.’

‘February! Well,’ said Romilly, ‘that’s ages ahead of this.’

‘Yes, but we’re going to make a farewell tour of civilization first,’ said Janet; ‘Jim wants to try and enlarge his intellect before

we settle in our wilderness, though I fear we shall hardly do it in the time.'

Brand grinned placidly without looking up; he knew very well that Janet had found her master, and let her play at freedom with her tongue as much as she liked.

Romilly held Ella's hand, and would not give in.

'Do, Ella,' he urged in a low persuasive tone, looking up at her with a smile that she loved to see. 'It would be so awfully jolly.'

'Oh! leave me in the lurch, of course!' cried Janet, in a style with which most of them were familiar. 'Abandon me! Let me do all the work alone! What does Jim signify? What is a paltry outfit and the convenience of two drivelling idiots who——'

'Shut up, Janet!' cried Jack furiously,

recognising his portrait. 'Brand, don't allow her to minimize me.'

'Don't you mean mummify?' suggested Janet.

'Well, Ella,' broke in Worsley's quiet voice, and everybody looked up and listened, 'when you have quite finished arguing amongst yourselves, perhaps you will listen to me. I have had an offer for the *Ariadne*——'

Romilly coloured, and Ella immediately suspected him of having made the offer, but she was wrong.

'And I mean to accept it,' Worsley continued. 'I did say I would not sell it at all, but now that you and Janet have seen fit to hook me in for the expenses of two weddings as soon as my back was turned, of course I have no alternative. The picture, however, wants what our friend

Bompas called "another coat of paint," and I should like you to come up and sit.'

'Then of course I must come,' said Ella; and in case he should not see for himself how pleased she was, she squeezed Romilly's hand.

'We'll go to theatres,' said Romilly, 'and concerts, and the opera, Ella; have you ever been to the opera?'

'I've never been to anything,' said Ella; 'never seen a play in my life.'

'I'll finish digging the garden for the winter while they're gone,' said Brand to Janet. 'You can pluck and eat up the rest of your poultry and exhaust your superfluous vocabulary.'

'And what shall I do?' asked Jack disconsolately. 'It'll be beastly dull when Sally Brass and Miss Prig-on-Stilts are tied

up and carried off, though they do lead me such a dog's life.'

'What should you say to taking a berth on my new farm as odd boy?' said Brand, laughing.

'Oh! do you mean it?' cried Jack, jumping up and preparing to perform a *pas d'extase* in his seven-league boots. 'Do you really mean it?'

'Yes, I do,' said Brand seriously; 'if you can persuade your family to part with you.'

Jack winked, but with a certain mournful air.

'It'll take no more persuasion than you can swallow and see none the worse for,' said he, and added with energy, thumping his benefactor violently on the back. 'I call you a diamond of the deepest dye—a brick and a half, and no mistake—the

quintessence of a rattling jolly dog! By-the-bye, I shan't have to take 'Otto,' or 'L'Avare with me, shall I? I suspect there'll be a heavy duty on foreign books, you know.'

'Leave 'em for the rising generation,' laughed Brand.

'I say, Jim, you and I must be going if we're to be in time for dinner,' said Romilly, rising and depositing his little ally, Madge, on the end of the sofa at her mother's feet, where he had been sitting; 'and Mrs. Worsley, if I come over with the carriage to-morrow forenoon, may I take Ella to see Sir John? He is laid up with gout, or he would have come; but he is very anxious to know her, and I promised to bring her if you would allow me.'

'Anything you like,' said Worsley, answering for his wife, 'as long as you

bring her safe home before it gets very late.'

So the next day Ella found herself driving with Romilly through Sir John's woods of Sunley, where they had first met in the spring ; and they recalled the day and all that each remembered about it, and Ella compared her dusty, toilsome walk, when she had had the double perambulator to push, or two children to drag by the hand, with this luxurious driving in the high barouche with two fast horses, and Romilly by her side.

'It is that that makes the difference, Lewis,' she said, raising her satisfied eyes to his. 'I don't mind any hard work with my hands, nor any privation and poverty—and you know I have tried it all—there is nothing hard to bear but real sorrow of heart, or pain of those we love.'

‘How should you like fashionable idleness?’ asked he. ‘Would that not be hard to bear?’

‘Yes,’ she answered; ‘but that I need never try. We will work very hard, whatever we do.’

‘It won’t be far to seek, when once heart and hand are willing,’ said he.

‘Oh, Lewis! I am afraid, do you know—afraid of my own happiness.’

Romilly glanced at her with a momentary look of fear.

‘So am I,’ he said with a sigh. ‘Yet you might think—if suffering earns any happiness—surely you and I need not fear yet.’

‘My life has been hard,’ said Ella; ‘but that has made it all the happier. Our happiness was very pure and sweet, because it came, I think, the right way—by labour

and sacrifice. Only——' she looked up at him with a hesitating smile and blush.

'Only what, darling?'

'I *was* very unhappy about—about you, Lewis, from that day we parted in the studio, till that other day when you came and made it all clear. It was like a dreadful dream, but I can't remember it now; I don't seem to have been unhappy enough.'

'Wait till you have married the villain of the deepest dye,' laughed Romilly. 'Ah!' he went on gravely, 'time is no measure of pain. Those years of my married life were bad enough; but I thought afterwards I had never known suffering till I had parted from you and felt what you were to me. Oh, Ella!' he put out his hand for hers, as if to assure himself that this was not a dream after all, and looked at her with something of the

old shadow in his eyes, 'it was as near despair as one can come, and not be lost.'

'I don't know whether it is that I cannot feel very strongly,' said Ella, 'but I never felt that. I quite believed that all my happiness was wrecked, but it seemed to match with the hardness and dulness of my life. I thought I should just bear it like other things. Even now I daren't believe it all, or be as happy as I ought.'

'That was because you were too busy to sit still and analyze your feelings and fret. Your treadmill would not wait for you ; I am sure that is a great help towards keeping the mind balanced. I don't know that self-control is not a more desirable quality than capacity for passionate despair,' Romilly went on, looking at her, and thinking, perhaps, of other experiences of his, 'more

helpful to those you live with—which is a fine test, although it may appear less interesting to you.’

Sir John was delighted with Ella, and much bewailed the hard fate that kept him to his chair when he would have liked to show her the house, and walk with her about the garden and pleasure-grounds.

‘But you must come and make your home here,’ said the old man, holding her hands in his; ‘you must not grudge him to me’ (with a nod and a smile towards Lewis) ‘for the little time I have to live. You know I call him my son—I can’t do without him.’

‘Call me your daughter, then,’ said Ella, with a happy smile, touched by his strong affection for him who was so dear to her, and Sir John kissed her on the spot.

After luncheon Lewis took her out, and

made her see his home with his eyes; and told her what, to him, was the special significance of each favourite haunt.

‘That’s where Jim and I used to play cricket years ago,’ he said, as they stood together at the gate of a long green meadow with trees all round it. ‘Jim says he came here in the summer at Uncle John’s and his father’s wish, and used to walk about the place and hate it, because he felt he was taking it from me whose home it has always been. Good old Jim! Under the beeches there by the lake I used to walk in the Long—conceited puppy!—proud of my college laurels, and raise up high ideals and despise the rest of mankind. I think I should be set now as a beacon on a hill, a warning for thoughtful young men.’

‘This has been one of the happiest days

of my life,' said Ella to Sir John, when the carriage was waiting to take her home.

'I hope all your days here will be no less happy,' he replied gallantly, 'as I know that mine and his will be the happier for your sweet presence here.'

A day or two later Ella and her father went up to London ; Worsley resumed his painting, Ella her sitting for the picture, and Romilly came and went perpetually—came, I should say, for it was not much that he went.

Dregert, looking the mere shadow of even what he had been when they last saw him, was about and at work again, tormented by his cough, but professing himself pretty well.

'I say,' observed Romilly one morning when he arrived, 'here's Brand coming up on business for a few days.'

‘To get his trousseau!’ laughed Ella.

‘Wouldn’t it be jolly to go to the Athenæum together? They’re doing “The Rivals” just now. Let’s make old Jim come. We’ll tell him he ought to try to enlarge his intellect for Janet’s sake, and pick up a few quotations.’

‘But how can we get tickets at so short notice?’ objected Ella.

‘Oh! I’ll engage to get a box,’ said Lewis tranquilly. ‘If not at the Athenæum, then at the Co-operative or the Olympian; there’s no great crush at this time of year. Besides, my friend Vaudeville will always lend me his. The only question is, will you both come?’

Persuasion was the last thing that either required, and the whole thing was settled, and Romilly gone again in ten minutes.

Ella felt, as she said, like an enchanted

princess or a lady out of a carriage in Hyde Park, when she found herself with her father, Romilly, and Brand, in Lord Vaudeville's sumptuous box at the Athenæum, and heard the orchestra tuning their instruments, while her heart beat high with pleasure and excitement, and she hardly knew what to look at first, there was so much to interest her, even before the curtain rose and the lights died down.

It was like waking from a marvellous dream each time the curtain fell, and she looked up at Romilly with a sigh and a smile, that he might understand that it was intense interest that held her so very quiet all the time.

‘Do you want to look about you?’ said Romilly, handing her his opera-glass, only too content, for his part, to watch the play of expression on her lovely face.

‘I see Herr Dregert,’ said she presently, ‘near a door in that gallery—about the middle——’

‘You mustn’t call it a gallery, though,’ said Romilly, following her eyes, and recognising his friend; ‘that’s the upper circle.’

‘Oh! I don’t think he is fit to be out at this time of night; and sitting up there, too, in the full glare and heat of the gas, and then going out into the raw November air. It is bitterly cold, you know. How can he be so foolish!’

‘He sometimes says he has nothing to live for,’ said Romilly.

‘How wrong of him!’ said Ella. ‘I am much more frivolous, Lewis, than I thought,’ she went on, laughing. ‘I find it quite as much fun looking at the audience as at the play. How painfully glum the ladies

looked during the fun in that scene, didn't they?'

'I only looked at one,' said Romilly, 'and she was anything but glum.'

'Such odd people have just come into that box to our left, opposite, Lewis. Do lend me the glass again.'

'Give it here, Jim,' said Romilly politely to his cousin, and between them they handed it to her.

'I was trying to cultivate my ideas,' said Jim apologetically, while Ella directed the glass towards the latest subject of interest.

'Do look presently, Lewis, and tell me what sort of people they are,' said she; and Romilly and Worsley exchanged smiles and shrugs as who should say, 'A woman, and mortal after all!'

'The men look like Polish counts or hair-dressers,' Ella went on. 'Foreigners, I

should think. But the woman—I don't think lady is quite the word—she reminds me of the sort of person I sometimes see walking near the fashionable shops with seal and sable down to her very heels—they make my blood run cold. I wish she would put her fan down a little more, though even as it is I can see her rouge. What masses of hair, too! Do you know, though it is a style of face I hate, I must admit that it is handsome; when she was younger, she must have been beautiful.'

'I see nothing but an enormous bouquet, a waving fan, and a glitter of diamonds,' said Romilly, 'and three black moustaches in white shirt-fronts.'

'I wish she would come more into the light,' said Ella, still full of curiosity.

'Shall I go and ask her to oblige you?' laughed Romilly.

‘They can’t care about the play, they came so very late,’ Ella said. ‘Take the glass, Lewis, and tell me which of the foreign counts is her husband.’

‘The one she pays least attention to,’ suggested Brand.

‘Probably she has left him at home,’ said the more cynical Romilly, taking the glass out of her hand.

‘She is looking at us, now,’ said Ella.

‘And perhaps asking the nearest nobleman which of those ugly Englishmen is the husband of that lovely girl!’ suggested Romilly, raising the glass to his eyes.

‘I see Herr Dregert going away,’ said Ella—‘to avoid the rush, I suppose, and get a cab without catching his death.’

‘That man in spectacles, with long grey hair?’ asked Brand. ‘He looks mortally ill;’ then by chance, or perhaps by mag-

netism of the other's will, he caught Romilly's eyes turned upon him with a look of agonized appeal, which warned him above all things to keep silence.

The curtain rose at that moment; Ella and her father bent forward to watch the play, and Romilly, who was standing behind Ella's chair, laid his hand on Brand's arm and made him a sign to come away at once.

Ella heard the door close after them and half rose, dreading she knew not what; but Worsley laughed.

'My dear child ! They're only gone for ices, or at the most to see whether Dregert is ill. Do sit still, now; they will be back presently : the play, you know, is nothing to them.'

Ella laughed at her own nervousness, and was soon once more absorbed in watching the stage.

Outside, in the dimly-lighted narrow passage, Romilly, still holding Brand's arm, was leaning against the red curved wall, his breath coming short and hard, and great beads of dew standing on his forehead.

‘Lewis—Lewis, old chap! Good God!’ uttered Brand in a whisper, frightened at the deathly paleness of his face, and feeling that he was shaking in every limb. ‘Are you ill, I say? What is it?’

‘Help me round to that box—the box opposite, you know,’ whispered Romilly faintly; but instead of going forward his head sank on Brand's shoulder, and Jim heard him murmur, ‘Ella, Ella! My darling—God help us!’

Jim drew his arm firmly through his own, begging him to try and keep up, though he had not the faintest notion what could be the matter. He only fancied

Romilly felt himself very ill, and perhaps thought he was dying.

‘Look here,’ said he in a very distracted whisper, ‘you’re only a little faint, you know. Shan’t I call some of these fellows? That blow on the head——’

‘No, no,’ said poor Romilly impatiently. ‘We’ve no time to lose. I’m all right.’

‘Come on then,’ said Brand, helping him along; and in a few minutes he seemed almost himself again.

‘Stay by me, Jim,’ he said, as they neared the door of the box. ‘My nerve is gone;’ he laughed, and Brand felt a ghastly suspicion that he was going mad. ‘That was my wife—that flashy woman in the rouge and the diamonds. You’ll hardly care to be introduced——’

‘You don’t know what you’re saying, old chap,’ said Jim soberly, thinking more

seriously of that blow on the head in the hunting-field, and noticing with alarm how wild Romilly looked with his deathly face and that unreal, ghastly smile. ‘Look, come home quietly with me, and I’ll tell them you’re not very well. Ella must not be frightened.’

‘Oh, Ella!’ exclaimed Romilly, as if he would break down there and then, but he pulled himself together. ‘I’m not mad,’ he said earnestly. ‘Write what I tell you—my hand shakes’—he tore a leaf out of his pocket-book—‘while I can think of it.’

Jim took the paper and pencil to humour him, and Romilly dictated:

“Don’t wait for us—nothing alarming. Will see you in the morning.” There, give it to one of the waiters to take to Worsley, and we are safe for the night,’ said he, passing his hand across his forehead.

‘Well, let us find a waiter,’ said Jim, only anxious to keep his cousin from making a disturbance by going into that box amongst people whom he could not possibly know. But Romilly knew well enough what he wanted.

‘I shall not let her go so easily now,’ he said with set teeth, and Brand felt him shuddering by the hand that gripped his arm.

Romilly beckoned to a waiter.

‘You don’t know these people, my dear Lewis,’ Jim ventured to whisper as they approached the door; but Romilly shook him off, and went forward with desperate resolution.

‘They are just gone, sir,’ said the man.

The box was empty.

Brand was intensely relieved, but Romilly turned to him with a dazed look, and

seemed for the instant to have lost all power of sense or motion.

Brand attempted to take his arm to get him away, but Romilly suddenly made for the nearest stairs, and Brand followed him in the utmost perturbation.

‘There!’ he heard Romilly exclaim in a low excited voice as he ran down. ‘There she is!’ and in the lobby below he saw the large, handsome woman in the diamonds and the rouge, and one of the foreign-looking gentlemen hastily throwing a cloak round her.

At the same moment a cry rang out—could it be Romilly’s voice, so hoarse and shrill?—‘Victorine! Victorine!’ there was some running and confusion, a scream of a woman’s voice, a volley of outlandish curses, and Brand congratulated himself on arriving upon the scene just in time to pull his

cousin out of a *mêlée* with two of the foreigners, while the third happily, as he thought, was just escaping out of sight with the lady. Romilly dealt him a hearty blow on the chest for his interference which took him very much by surprise, and then shaking himself free was making for the door, when he saw what the little crowd and scuffle had hitherto prevented his seeing—Dregert lying on the steps in the bitter night wind and drizzling, drifting sleet, with blood upon his lips.

Two waiters and a policeman stood over him, asking each other how it happened. The lady and all three gentlemen had disappeared, and Romilly turned to the policeman and took him by the arm. ‘Find that woman for me and bring me her address, and I’ll give any reward you like to ask,’ he said.

The policeman stared at Romilly, and then looked at Brand who slightly shook his head, whereat the policeman said, 'All right sir ; make yourself quite easy about that ;' and then they carried Dregert into the nearest shelter they could obtain.





CHAPTER IX.

‘Ay de aquel alma, a padecer dispuesta,
Que espere a su Rahel en la otra vida,
Y tiene a Lia para siempre en esta.’

LOPE DE VEGA.

[‘Alas for that soul, to suffer doomed,
Who waits for his Rachel till the other life,
And has Leah for ever in this.’]

BEFORE the play was over a waiter handed Worsley Brand’s little note ; he ran hastily over the brief message with his eyes, and then, his face clearing, handed it to Ella.

‘No doubt Dregert is ill and they are afraid of frightening you,’ he said con-

fidently; 'our young heroes will sit up with him to-night, and we shall hear how he is in the morning.'

'I wish Lewis had just said good-night to me,' said Ella, smiling faintly and looking anxious.

'Don't be so ridiculously nervous,' said Worsley; 'he must be out of your sight sometimes. A man hates to be fussed about.'

Ella immediately laughed at herself, and set herself to attend to the play as if she had not a care in the world till it was over.

When they came out it was snowing fast; the wind was rising, and it was bitterly cold.

'Beastly night!' growled a poor-looking young man to his friend, as they pulled their hats over their eyes and went out in flimsy coats and without umbrellas.

'Here is winter beginning already!' laughed a pretty woman whose husband

was wrapping her furs round her, and whose carriage and pair of horses stood before the portico.

Ella shivered and held fast by her father's arm till a cab was found for them, and caught herself anxiously scanning every face that passed, half hoping Lewis would yet come; and then she wondered how she could be missing him so sorely already. At last they drove off in the gusty night through the wet, shining streets where they could see the few foot-passengers striving with bent heads against the capricious wind, and the gas, through the splashed misty windows of the cab, flared and twisted and flickered, and the flakes of snow fled by like little tongues of flame as they crossed a ray of light, or were driven against the glass with showers of rain-drops. Some of the pillar-posts and exposed wall-corners

were growing white already, and it looked about as miserable a night as one could see even in November and in London.

Ella passed a restless night, and came unusually early into the studio in the morning, and tried to busy herself with tidying it up, till Worsley should be ready for breakfast. She had not been there long when she heard a step at the door, and expecting Romilly, ran to open it. Brand was standing there, and when he saw her he turned as pale as death.

‘Er—where—where is your father?’ stammered he. ‘Can I speak to him?’

‘Is Lewis ill? Has anything happened?’ Ella asked tremulously. ‘Where is Lewis, Jim?’

‘No, no; he’s not ill,’ said Brand, trying to look reassuring. ‘Dregert had a bad attack last night, and Lewis won’t leave

him. But I must see your father at once.'

Ella felt that he feared to meet her questioning eyes, and that something serious had happened, though her question had not touched it, supposing it was true that Romilly was not ill. She sat down feeling faint and sick, but trying to keep quiet, while Brand went into Worsley's room and shut the door.

'Good heavens, Brand!' uttered Worsley, startled at his look. 'What brings you? Is Romilly there? What is it?'

Brand, glancing at the door, raised a warning finger for him to speak low, and then put a note from Romilly into his hands and said :

'I think this tells you all, but I'll stay and answer any questions. Only I'd like to get back to poor Lewis as soon as I can,

for he's nearly out of his senses ; and I don't think Dregert can last out the day. He has not spoken, and we don't think he is conscious.'

Romilly's few lines were simple enough.

'My wife is not dead, as I believed ; she was at the theatre last night. If you wish it, I will see you—Brand will tell you everything. Ella I must leave in your hands.'

Worsley comprehended the situation at once. 'The woman played him a trick,' he said to Brand, showing him the brief scrawl.

Brand nodded. 'He believes in everybody,' he said ; and then, looking at the note, 'he said it was mockery to talk about the sorrow he has brought on you and yours, and said the less said about himself the better. But he wanted me to give Ella

a little note after you have broken it to her, if you thought fit.'

'What! Am I to tell her?' uttered Worsley, dropping into a chair. 'I can't, Brand.'

'You must!' said Brand firmly; 'it is your duty.'

There was no willing Mrs. Worsley at hand to take the painful task upon herself, and Brand did not offer to do it, but only added that there was no time to be lost.

The two men were trembling, and the reflection from the cold snowy roofs outside made their pale faces more ghastly.

'Come,' said Jim huskily, 'it is cruel to wait—the poor girl knows something is wrong.'

As he spoke he opened the door, and Worsley had nothing for it but to enter the other room. Brand followed him, and

looked nervously at Ella. The sight of their faces was enough for her; she rose and came up to her father, looking appealingly from him to Brand.

‘I will be quite quiet,’ she said falteringly, ‘only tell me what has happened to him.’

It was too much for poor Brand, and he turned abruptly away to hide his emotion, wishing that Janet were here and himself at the Antipodes.

‘I can bear the truth if you will tell it me and hide nothing,’ Ella said. ‘Is he dead, papa?’ As her lips framed the terrible question she hid her face on his breast to hear the answer.

‘No, no, my child,’ said Worsley tremulously; ‘but this may be worse for you to bear—worse for him.’ He put his arm round her, and nerved himself to say the rest.

‘His wife is still living, my darling; he has seen her—that woman at the play last night. The story of her death was a trick—a lie—and Romilly is not free.’

Ella lay motionless in her father’s arms, her face hidden, and uttered not a word.

Worsley signed to Brand to come forward, and at his step Ella raised her white face and tearless eyes and looked at him.

‘Did he send any message to me, Jim?’

Brand gave her the note, and Worsley put her into a chair, and then hastily left the room.

‘MY DARLING,’ ran the hurried, passionate, scarcely coherent lines,—‘Heaven have mercy on us both—Brand will tell you all—Why are my sins and sorrows and follies to ruin your life?—God comfort you and help us both to bear the rest—tell me I

shall not serve in vain though I wait for you until life is over, my Rachel—tell me there *must* come a day when nothing shall part us——’

There it broke off, and Ella folded it and looked at Jim.

‘Tell me anything he said,’ she asked, holding out her hand for him to come close; and Brand took it and knelt down beside her chair.

‘He said he would come and say good-bye to you,’ he said huskily, the tears standing in his honest eyes, ‘if you wished it. And he has raved against himself all night for the sorrow he has caused you——’

‘Jim,’ interrupted Ella, laying her hands on his shoulders, and looking at him with a strength of patience that went to his heart, ‘he must not blame himself for

me. Tell him I would rather things should be as they are than not know that he has loved me—that if my sorrow is because of him, it is only the price of the intense happiness he has given me. And tell him, Jim, that I am very brave—you see I am—and that the time will seem short when it is over—when we meet in the other life. Hard work will keep me strong, and I shall always know he loves me, and that we are both working to one end, and living in one hope.’

‘And do you wish to see him?’ faltered Brand.

‘Do I wish?’ repeated Ella, hiding her face with a swift convulsive movement, as every nerve and fibre of her being thrilled with strong yearning for his presence. ‘Tell him I only wish it because I should die.’

‘Then he won’t come?’ said Brand, not sure what she meant.

Ella was concentrating all her self-control to think only of the man she loved—whose grief, she felt, must be yet greater than her own; and much as her heart cried out for him—for one last embrace and kiss; one more look of the beloved eyes; another clasp of the beloved hand—she knew that life for both of them would, after such a parting, be well-nigh impossible to face. She knew too, instinctively, that Romilly must feel as she did, and shrink from the ordeal, although he was ready to do as she might wish.

‘No,’ she said, turning her pale face again towards Brand, and putting her hand in his with mute thanks for his sympathy. ‘Say good-bye to him for me, and help him to look forward in hope. God help us!’

Brand kissed her, and went away with a very heavy heart.

‘And now, papa, let me go home at once,’ said poor Ella, going to find her father in his room.

‘I’ll come with you, darling,’ said he tenderly, longing for action of some sort, since any attempt at comfort could be nothing but a mockery.

‘No ; let me go alone,’ Ella answered ; and he felt she meant it, and would rather have it so.

In three-quarters of an hour they were driving through the snowy streets to Waterloo.

‘It is bitterly cold,’ said Worsley distressfully, looking at Ella’s set white face. ‘I don’t like your going down alone in this state, and on such a day.’

Ella laid her hand on his, and said she

was better out than in to-day ; and so he put her into the train, and saw it disappear, and then went back to find what inspiration he could in his empty studio.

At Eastcott the snow lay deep beside the embankment and along the footpath, which had not been trodden since the evening before.

‘Fly, miss?’ demanded the little porter civilly ; for everyone had by this time contrived to have an idea that Miss Worsley was to be Lady Romilly some day, and viewed her in a different light from that time forward.

‘No, thank you,’ said Ella ; ‘I’m going to walk—my things can come by the carrier.’

‘’Tain’t fit for you to walk, miss,’ the porter ventured to say ; ‘the snow’s more ’an a foot deep in the lane, an’ all drifted on the ’eath, miss.’

Ella smiled a wan smile, and disregarded his friendly suggestions.

‘Oh ! I shall like the walk,’ she said ; and went away down the steps, and plunged into the deep, untrodden snow, feeling that it might serve to cool the burning fever that consumed her.

When she came in sight of the little white house covered with autumnal creepers and leafless roses, every twig outlined with snow, and snow lying thick on the roof, and knew that she must face them all, and tell them what had happened, she felt her courage fail ; but the thought that for Lewis’s sake she must be brave nerved her to go on, and at last she entered the gates.

Ban and Hardigras rushed barking to meet her, and jumped at her, and covered her with snow ; and then Jack looked out

of the harness-room, where he was chopping scrap-cake, and called them off. Then he saw that it was Ella, and walked down to meet her.

‘Bad penny turned up again?’ asked he, laughing. ‘Why, what’s the matter? You look like I don’t know what. Are you ill? You’re wet up to your knees, I say. What *would* our friend Romilly say if he could see you!’

‘Don’t, Jack dear,’ said Ella, scarcely above a whisper, putting him gently aside; and he stood and stared after her with vague alarm as she went into the house. ‘I’ve come home,’ she said, walking into the kitchen, where Janet and Mrs. Worsley were laying dinner to save the expense of a fire in any other room. ‘Don’t say anything to me. Lewis’s wife is still alive, and it is all over. Give me something to

do;' and she began pulling off her walking-things, while the other two looked at her in blank dismay, and could not yet believe her words.

'How wet you are, dear !' said Mrs. Worsley, not daring to make any comment. 'You must be very cold. Stella, go and fetch Ella's old gown off the door upstairs. You must change here by the fire. The house is like a vault everywhere else.'

The wintry afternoon passed like a dream. Ella went about perfectly quiet, and helped in the usual work, saying nothing, and giving herself no rest. She washed up the pantry things, and the glasses froze to the dresser before she had time to dry them ; for the cold had become intense, and several panes of the pantry window had long been broken. When that was done, she discovered a dozen pairs of boots and shoes of

all sizes in the scullery which wanted cleaning, and set to work to black them.

‘She looks dreadfully ill,’ said Mrs. Worsley in a whisper to Janet, when Ella was out of hearing. ‘She must have caught her very death of cold; I can see her shivering still.’

‘I wish my old idiot were here!’ sighed Janet, with tears in her eyes; ‘he would tell us all about it. I can’t ask her, but no doubt he knows.’

‘She oughtn’t to be so quiet; it isn’t natural,’ Mrs. Worsley said, ‘and it can’t last. I wish your father were here.’

A rush and a shout from the children who had been sent to play in the dining-room while their elders were cleaning up the kitchen premises interrupted these remarks. ‘There’s water pouring down the stairs,’ they cried. ‘*Do* come and look!’

‘The cistern!’ cried Janet. ‘That pipe has burst with the frost!’ and away upstairs she rushed to see the icy water gushing violently from a cracked lead-pipe in a corner of the landing, and flowing away into the nursery and down the stairs to the lower rooms.

‘It’s coming through the kitchen ceiling!’ screamed the children, pleased but rather frightened.

Jack arrived on the scene, and stood about staring amongst the meandering pools of water. Suddenly he had an inspiration. ‘Cut the cistern-pipe outside, quick!’ he shouted, and tore away to get a ladder.

‘I’ll help you,’ said Ella, following him bareheaded across the snowy yard. ‘I’ll carry the ladder while you get an axe.’

In a few minutes the outside pipe was severed, and the water, diverted, ran away

down the garden paths and down amongst the foundations of the house; but every room in the house was wet, floors, walls, and ceilings soaked and dripping, and the rest of the short winter afternoon was occupied in the mopping and sopping up of the water.

‘ You never saw such an icicle as there is hanging to that pipe outside,’ said Jack, coming in about dark for the milk-cans; ‘ that cork we put in only half stops it; it’ll be grand by to-morrow morning.’

‘ Pah! What a smell of size!’ said Janet, jumping out of the way as the water from the kitchen ceiling dripped on to her back. ‘ Take care, Ella! the floor is a sheet of ice.’

‘ We must just have fires in all the rooms—at any rate, the bedrooms,’ said Mrs. Worsley, sighing over the expense.

‘I’ll light them,’ said Ella, and they dared not gainsay.

The children had their tea in the drawing-room, the only place which had escaped the overflow.

‘Wasn’t it awful fun when it all came swishing down the stairs!’ said Sidney with his mouth full of bread and treacle, when they were all sitting over their tea. ‘I wonder how deep the water was on the landing?’

‘About a yard,’ said Nora, rolling her eyes as she invented the statement.

‘As if it could have stood there at all!’ exclaimed Stella contemptuously. ‘How deep could water—or milk-and-water—stand on this table?’

‘Up to the ceiling,’ said Nora, with more wit than she usually displayed, and all the others giggled at her folly; and Lottie,

feeling that fun was the order of the evening, tossed a handful of treacly crumbs on to her own curly brown head and gazed round for applause. Godfrey appreciated the humour of the action, and immediately performed it on his own account, and then the elder ones called out to Janet, and the delinquents were hustled off to bed.

‘As there are fires upstairs, I suppose we had better give them their hot baths to-night?’ suggested Janet, looking into the kitchen, and Ella hailed as a relief the prospect of another hour’s work and noise before the terrible repose and silence of the evening settled down.

After that they darned beside the kitchen fire till bedtime; Jack, with a long string attached to his stupendous boot, knotting away at the rabbit-nets, whereby he made, through the medium of the *Swop and Sell*, a

limited income for himself; and none of them speaking a word.

‘Well, I’m about as tired as a Christian can be,’ said Janet at last, thinking that poor Ella ought to be in bed. ‘Let us turn in early for once, and I hope to goodness none of the children will wake us to-night.’

‘Lock the back-door, Jack—there’s an angel!’ said Mrs. Worsley.

‘Where?’ said Jack, pretending to be very much startled, and looking round him in a theatrical manner.

‘Don’t be an idiot!’ said Janet, as a matter of course, and they were all much astonished when Ella laid her head on the table and went off into a fit of laughter.

The women looked at Jack as much as to say, ‘See what you’ve done!’ and Jack

crept away on tiptoe to fasten the doors and keep out of sight.

Ella took a candle and went away to bed, but the other two lingered and looked at each other. 'I am frightened about her,' said Mrs. Worsley. 'If she would break down it would be better.'

Janet had been struggling against tears all the evening as she looked at her sister and partly felt what it must be that she suffered, and then thought of her own happiness. She now burst out crying. 'I can't think how she can bear it like that,' she sobbed; 'I only kept quiet by main force because I was so afraid of upsetting her.'

'Poor child, poor child!' murmured Mrs. Worsley. 'What a life for her to come back to!'

'I shall ask Jim to let her come out with us to the West,' said Janet, drying her

eyes; 'then she can never meet him again, and perhaps we shall find somebody else for her.'

'It's beginning to thaw, I declare,' said Jack, flattening his nose against the landing-window when they went up to bed. 'What a state the place 'll be in to-morrow!'

'It may be beginning to thaw indoors,' said Janet, with grim scepticism.

Ella lay perfectly still with closed eyes until the candle was out, dreading to speak with Janet, the more so that her quick ear detected a little sobbing of the breath, and she guessed that her sister had been crying. But she could not sleep, and long after Janet had fallen into the profound slumber of the weary, she lay awake, trying to keep thought at bay, while faces came and looked at her through the dark—not Lewis's, but the rest—her father's, Brand's, the little Eastcott

porter's ; faces of the actors—Bob Acres and young Absolute ; and, above all, the three out of that box opposite, and the bright flashing eyes of the 'bold brown woman from afar,' came mocking and staring at her.

Drip, drip, drip.

No, it is nothing ; never mind.

Drip, drip, drip, drip.

It sounds almost as if it must be in the room.

Drip, splish, splash.

It is thawing outside.

Splish, splash, trickle.

There could no longer be any doubt that the water was coming in through the ceiling. Ella acknowledged as much to herself, but she was desperately tired, and felt a dull pain in her limbs, and knew that anywhere outside the bed it must be very cold. Besides,

how could a little more or less of water hurt the carpetless floor ?

Janet's sense of responsibility by this time had awakened her also, and she lay listening and pursuing the same arguments in her mind, almost ready to cry with rage at the idea of having to turn out and attend to the mischief.

The dripping sound went on, quickening now and again into a spiteful trickle.

Sleep and dreams had for the moment dulled her consciousness of the events of the day, and a cunning thought struck her :

‘ If I appear to be sound asleep, will not Ella get up and see to it ? If it were a mouse rattling in the trap under the chest of drawers, of course it would be my duty as well as my privilege to get up and drown it. If it were one of the children crying, Ella would be on the spot before her eyes

were open. Into whose province does the trickling of water fall ?’

‘You coward!’ said she vigorously to herself the next moment, dashed out of bed, struck a light, stumbled into a pool on the floor, placed baths and basins under the cracks whence the water was falling, threw down a towel or two to mop up the worst of it, and jumped back into bed with chattering teeth. Evidently the snow on the roof was thawing fast.

Tink, tinkle, tink, tink, went the water into baths and basins, and to its uncomfortable music Janet once more dozed off. Suddenly both girls dashed spasmodically under the blankets.

‘A rat on the bed!’

‘No, it’s that fiendish water!’ said Janet, hearing, as the beating of her heart subsided, an evil *thud, thud*, on the bed-clothes

above them ; and there was nothing for it but to get up instantly, and move the bed, if any dry place could be found for it.

They spent half an hour standing about on the wet floor with slipperless feet, wringing out the wet towels, and moving the chairs and clothing out of harm's way.

‘It's four o'clock,’ said Janet, shivering. ‘Your side of the bed is quite wet. Why not go and beg shelter of mamma?’

Mrs. Worsley was awake with the baby when Ella came shivering in, her hands and feet blue with cold, her night-dress splashed with water, her beautiful hair hanging round her like a veil, and her dark eyes looking almost unearthly in their wide tearlessness.

Mrs. Worsley was walking up and down with the infant, and begged her to get into bed and try and get warm. Ella obeyed, and sat up amongst the pillows. Presently

she held out her arms as Mrs. Worsley came near with the child.

‘Lend him to me,’ she said wistfully.

‘Do you mind holding him just while I go down for some more milk?’ said his mother apologetically, putting the tiny creature into her arms, and Ella took it eagerly.

It all came upon her then when she was left alone—she, who was to have neither husband nor child, a widow before she was wed, and that on the mere threshold of life.

‘Lewis, Lewis!—my love!—my life!’ burst irrepressibly from her lips, as she laid the warm baby-face to her bosom and rocked it with her own passionate weeping, and clasped and kissed it, calling Romilly’s name in her half-conscious anguish, while all the pent-up trouble found its way at last in great aching sobs and paroxysms of tears. ‘Lewis, Lewis!—half of my soul!’



CHAPTER X.

‘Er that’s ; vergab dir lange schon ;
Doch manche heisse Thräne fiel
Um dich
Doch still, er ruht—er ist am Ziel.’

FREILIGRATH.

‘**T**AKE him to the hospital,’ suggested the policeman who helped Romilly to raise poor Dregert from the steps where he had sunk down.

‘It would be cruelty,’ said Romilly ; ‘he is dying. Can’t we find some nearer place? Brand’—he turned to Jim who stood by—
‘try that little baker’s shop over the way

—a dying man may surely ask that charity.'

Brand's persuasions were successful, and they carried Dregert across the wet street, through the little shop to a small parlour at the back where they laid him down.

'We'll pay you for everything,' said Brand, as he insisted, at Romilly's instigation, on their being supplied with pillows and all that they wanted ; the women of the place ran about and made themselves helpful, and a boy was fetched out of his bed and sent off for a doctor.

While they were waiting for his return an elderly, motherly person volunteered to sit beside the sick man, saying that maybe she was more used to it than they were.

The shop was shut by this time, and Brand and Romilly walked through into it and partly closed the doors behind them.

Brand sat on the counter, and Romilly, the immediate anxiety about Dregert no longer occupying his mind, paced up and down in growing agitation, uttering his thoughts in broken exclamations.

‘Jim,’ he said at last, pausing in front of him, ‘disabuse your mind of the notion that I am mad. I don’t know how it is that I am sane still, but I am. That woman is my wife. When they told me she was dead, it was a trick and a lie—the devil knows what end of theirs it served. You see what it has done for me and—and for her——’ his self-control forsook him, and he broke off and turned away in an anguish of despair. ‘Oh! I could face hell itself,’ he uttered, sinking on to a chair and covering his face, ‘if only she might be spared. Oh God! why was *I* to bring this upon her?’

Brand saw clearly enough that Romilly,

though half-crazed with the shock, was still quite rational, and he felt that his diplomatic nod to the policeman when Romilly had offered a reward for tracing his wife, had been singularly out of place. Perhaps he had frustrated Romilly's only chance of bringing her to justice.

‘Lewis, dear fellow,’ said he rather nervously, ‘upon my word I thought you were off your head, you know, when you turned so queer and all that, and I—I—when you told the fellow to go after her and offered no end of a reward, I—I signed to him not to notice what you said.’

To Jim's astonishment Romilly only looked relieved.

‘I suppose it was natural,’ he said indifferently. ‘I shall have to put it all into my lawyer's hands—I can perhaps divorce her, and get away to the other end of the

world. I shall thank heaven if I never see her again.'

Brand sighed and looked at his cousin with hearty sympathy.

'Can I do anything for you, Lewis?' he asked presently. 'I'm not a good hand at nursing, unless it's carrying you want done. What will you do about this miserable business?'

Romilly buried his face again upon his outstretched arms, and Brand saw his hands clenched and trembling, and knew that the whole agony of the parting was before him then, sinking into his soul.

He looked at his watch, after keeping quiet till he could bear the terrible oppression of silence no longer, and found it only a little past two.

'How long have we?' asked Romilly, lifting his haggard face at the click of the

watch. 'They won't be up till half-past eight, I suppose.'

'I was thinking,' said Jim, 'I must go to our hotel and change my things; I can't well go about in evening dress at that time of day.'

'Go and sleep there—why not? and come back here in the morning,' suggested Lewis.

Brand did not choose to say that he had no intention of leaving his cousin alone for the night. 'Such a bore,' said he; 'for the balance of the small hours it really isn't worth while.'

Then by degrees Romilly arranged with Brand what he was to do, and wrote the two brief notes which he was to deliver.

'And look here, Jim,' said he, forcing himself to be calm, 'I'll go there and see her if she wishes it; tell her that. I'd do more than that, God knows, if it were

possible to give her the slightest comfort. It would be a terrible ordeal and, I think, a mistake ;' he hid his face again, overwhelmed with misery. 'God !' he murmured brokenly, 'why must it be ? Ella, Ella my darling, why am I to curse your life ?' He rose abruptly. 'There, you know what to say,' he said shortly, turning away ; 'do the best you can, and don't see me till it is over.' And with that he went hastily into the other room, leaving Brand to spend the rest of the night as best he could.

The motherly woman came into the shop directly afterwards, and apologized for being able to provide nothing but a high stool for his comfort ; but Brand did not hesitate to declare that he was quite comfortable and perfectly happy, two of the most astounding fibs he had ever told in his life.

‘ You see it is going on for four already,’ he said, ‘ and I shall be off by six;’ and the good creature left him to his own devices.

He hurried away as soon as the shop was open in the morning, and after changing his dress went and acquitted himself of his painful mission, as we have seen, and then came straight back to Romilly, thinking what a blessing it was that he had Dregert to employ his thoughts at this crisis, as otherwise he would hardly have dared to leave him.

‘ How is he ?’ was his first question as Romilly met him in the shop, looking very grey and haggard in the cold morning light.

‘ Just the same,’ answered Romilly; and his eyes asked what his lips could not, ‘ Tell me of her.’

They went into the dingy little parlour together, and Brand briefly told him what had passed, Romilly listening with bent head in silence.

‘She bore it nobly,’ Jim said with a faltering voice, as he finished his story, ‘and bade me tell you that even though her suffering is because of you, it is only the price of the unspeakable happiness you have given her.’

Romilly wrung his hand with a broken ‘God bless you, Jim!’ and it was long before either spoke again.

A doctor came and told them what they knew already—that Dregert was dying, and that nothing could be done for him beyond what they were doing.

‘He cannot live twenty-four hours,’ the doctor repeated to Brand, who accompanied him to his carriage. ‘I’ll try and look in

again this evening if you like, but I can't do anything. The mischief is of long standing—must have gone on for years ; but there has been a shock, I think.'

Later on, when Brand had gone out to get some papers and breathe the open air, such as it was on that bitter November afternoon, and Romilly was sitting plunged in sad thought beside the dying man, Dregert opened his eyes and made a faint movement. Romilly was bending over him in an instant, and saw by the eyes that he was conscious.

'Raise me,' he said faintly in German; and Romilly lifted him and propped his head with pillows, and waited anxiously to see if he wanted anything else.

'Are we alone?' he asked presently. 'Come closer—I'll tell it you while I can—you—you will do—the rest—for me?'

‘Trust me,’ said Romilly, taking the dying man’s hand in his. ‘Anything I can.’

‘You will find my papers at the studio,’ Dregert went on after a pause, his voice growing a little stronger. ‘My wife’s letters, and the certificate of our marriage, and her photographs, and the certificate of her death; some you must keep, but in time destroy them all.’

‘I will,’ said Romilly earnestly.

‘You mustn’t judge her too hardly,’ Dregert went on; ‘there were five-and-twenty years between us—she was a mere girl, beautiful as the morning. Why should she care for a dull, absent man like me, absorbed as I always was in my art? She left me—I came back after a month’s absence to find my home empty—I never saw her again—until—until——’ his voice

failed him, and Romilly, supporting him on one arm, held a cordial to his lips.

‘Twenty years!’ murmured Dregert, as he sank back on his pillows. ‘Twenty years! and yet the face is the same. Two years afterwards I received the certificate of her death.’

At this moment there was a noise and disturbance in the shop outside, and the faces of both men underwent a painful transformation.

‘I insist, woman! Who are you, sir, that dares interfere between a wife and her husband?’

It was a woman’s voice, not an unmelodious one, but raised somewhat high, and every syllable, spoken with a slight foreign accent, could be heard in the inner room.

‘My name is Brand,’ said Jim’s tranquil voice in reply; ‘I’ll give a message if

you like, but your husband shall not be annoyed.'

'My husband, sir, has more feeling than to be *annoyed* at the sight of me,' the woman retorted haughtily ; and there was a sound of rapid steps, and then Brand's voice again, not so tranquil as before.

'You shall not pass—it is cruel to disturb a dying man. Madam, be persuaded. I do not want to be rough. Come to-morrow.'

'My husband dying ! and you bid me come to-morrow !'

'Your husband is ill enough,' said Brand ; 'but it is Herr Dregert who is dying. For God's sake, madam, do not speak so loud.'

'Herr Dregert is my husband,' cried the woman ; 'I *insist* upon seeing him !'

'How the woman lies !' thought Romilly, shuddering.

Probably Brand had smiled at her audacity, for the next sound was vituperation.

‘Wretch ! Hard-hearted monster of an *Engländer* ! I *will* pass !’

Then sounds of a slight scuffle, and ejaculations of ‘Pardon me ; I cannot allow it !’ and then suddenly a most unvarnished ‘By Jove ! I’ll call the police.’

‘Brute, to ill-treat a miserable woman !’

‘Madam, have some consideration for a dying man.’

Romilly went to the door and opened it, feeling that the noise, and scandal it was no doubt creating, must be stopped at all hazards.

Brand fell back at once, but Victorine took them both at unawares by dashing into the inner room, a strange vision of *décolleté* silk and bugles, lace and diamonds, with half her hair on her shoulders. At

the same moment Brand heard again the wild, hoarse cry of 'Victorine ! Victorine !' that he had heard in the lobby the night before, and it dawned upon him in the midst of his blank astonishment that it had not been Romilly's voice at all.

Romilly would have thrown himself in her way, but that cry paralyzed him for the moment ; and the next thing that he saw was Victorine in her theatrical attire kneeling beside the sofa where lay the dying man, weeping passionately, and calling aloud in German to him to forgive her.

Brand understood not a single word, but Romilly heard her pouring out incoherent confessions of the life she had led, of her wanderings and wickedness, of her relents and remorse, of her vague search for him, and then appeal once more for his forgiveness before he died.

‘Victorine!’ said Romilly beseechingly, seeing that she made not the slightest allusion to him, and wondering what end this wicked farce was to serve—‘Victorine, don’t lie to a dying man. Come away and leave him in peace. Dregert,’ he added, turning to his poor friend, and speaking German, ‘this is my wife. Forgive her if she has wronged you, and let her go.’

‘Oh! I have wronged him too,’ cried the wretched woman; ‘I wanted money—he never knew I had a husband—but I did set him free; they told him I was dead. I was afraid it would all be found out, and they would punish me. Oh, Lewis!’ she cried, throwing herself at Romilly’s feet, ‘if you forgive me, he will forgive me. Can you let him leave me like this? You were always good. Forgive me, Lewis! have pity!’

‘Hush, Victorine—hush!’ said Romilly in a low, trembling voice; ‘I forgave you long ago, though I little knew what I had to forgive. Say no more;’ and he turned away and covered his face with his hands.

‘Heinrich! Heinrich!’ she sobbed, throwing herself down then beside the sofa, ‘oh, though you hate me——’

Dregert, with an effort, laid his wasted hand feebly upon the fallen head, looking at her with infinite tenderness and sorrow.

‘Peace, peace!’ he whispered. ‘None may withhold forgiveness this side of the grave.’

Brand had retired in hopeless perplexity some time before, and Romilly now also left the room, only saying to Victorine as he went:

‘You will stay with your husband as long as he has need of you.’

‘What the devil was all that foreign jargon and screeching about?’ demanded Brand, with that reasonable annoyance that an Englishman feels when anyone speaks a language which he doesn’t understand. ‘Have you left the woman there?’

He was smoking as he paced up and down in the snowy street outside, and Romilly took his arm and paced beside him, and told him what had happened.

‘By Jove! you take it quietly,’ exclaimed Brand, staring incredulously at his cousin.

Romilly passed his hand across his forehead. ‘The sight of death dwarfs things so,’ he said rather absently; ‘one may well be quiet in the face of it, and of misery worse even than one’s own.’

‘Ah! now that it is over,’ said Brand, ‘that is easily said. It seems to me you forget yourself too readily, Lewis. Think

of this time yesterday, and of all that you have gone through since.'

'Was it only yesterday?' murmured Romilly. 'It might be a thousand years. But even then, Jim, think of Dregert's long sad life, sick in heart and in health, and this—this shameful story at the end; and then, think of Victorine!' He shuddered. 'I suppose I am a kind of fool, but I would give up half my life and happiness—nay, if it were not that Ella must suffer with me, I would give it all, so Victorine could be what I held her to be when I first knew her. What will become of her? I can't help feeling responsible for her.'

'Pooh!' said Jim, looking helplessly at the smoke of his cigar as he held it in his fingers. 'Nobody can control a woman like that, and of course you are not responsible for her at all. Don't be so fanciful.'

‘Won’t you write to Ella?’ Brand asked presently; ‘or telegraph? Or why not go round now to the studio?’

‘I think I shall be there myself as soon as any message can reach her,’ Romilly answered; ‘and I won’t leave Dregert to die here alone among strangers. I only came out now to leave them together a few minutes, and to get air—I thought I should suffocate.’

‘But can’t his wife look after him?’ suggested Brand.

‘Well, even if it is in her to comfort his last hour,’ said Romilly, ‘I can’t leave her to face all the rest alone. It can’t be very long—besides,’ he added, with a quiet, happy smile, ‘I know what Ella would wish.’

‘Where are all those foreign counts who chaperoned her last night?’ demanded

Brand. 'Isn't that support enough for one woman?'

'Don't, Jim!' said Romilly. 'I'll tell you what you may do; go round to the studio and tell them—tell Ella all that has happened. Of course, I would rather go myself, but that is out of the question, and it would be cruel to put it off until I can go.'

'I'm awfully happy, Lewis, old chap!' exclaimed Brand heartily. 'I was nearly crazy about you all night and this morning. I'd have done anything for you or Ella—except—except give up Janet, you know,' he added ingenuously, looking almost ashamed of making any exception at all; 'and I declare I'd sooner be shot than go through this morning again.'

'Heaven forbid you should have the alternative!' ejaculated Romilly fervently.

‘Now go, Jim. Don’t be long; and bring me a message—a note I should prefer, because I can see it as well as hear.’

‘All right!’ said Jim happily. ‘She’ll be sorry about poor Dregert, too;’ and off he went with a light heart.

Romilly went back to Dregert’s room, and his susceptibilities received a strange and painful shock, an impression of jarring incongruousness, to see Victorine in her flashy finery—a sort of rich dress that combined somehow a magnificent with a dragged air, very grand and not very fresh, and in any case utterly unsuitable to morning wear—with her piled-up hair in disorder, and diamonds sparkling amongst the crushed, soiled lace at the open throat of her gown, supporting in her arms the dying man who had been his friend, and whose sensitive, poetic nature was far removed,

one would have thought, from such a possibility as this.

And yet there was that in Victorine's pale face—pale in spite of rouge and tears—when she looked up as he entered which redeemed it all ; genuine sorrow, and awe at the near approach of the terrible change we all quail to look upon.

‘Do not leave us,’ she whispered, terrified, and with a deprecating look which seemed to acknowledge that she should ask no kindness at the hands of this man whom she had wronged so cruelly.

Dregert's hands moved vaguely, as if seeking something.

‘Your hand,’ whispered Romilly to her, divining with quick sympathy what he sought.

But Victorine's tears overflowed again.

‘Oh ! not mine—I can't,’ she said, with

a stifled sob. ‘Yours—there is no help in mine.’

Romilly took one of Dregert’s hands in his, and, kneeling, said in a clear low voice, in German, the Lord’s Prayer and the Collect ‘Lighten our darkness;’ and even as he prayed, that darkness fell, and the spirit passed away beyond its shadow—beyond the perils and dangers of the night, and the sound of human prayer and sorrow.

Romilly laid the calm, thin face back upon the pillows, and smoothed the long grey hair to either side, and then he bade Victorine kneel and pray with him.

The words he spoke were brief and simple—a confession of sin and of weakness—a strong prayer for pardon and for help; but he constrained himself to utter aloud the natural cry of his own heart in

that hour for her sake, who had long, long since forgotten how to pray.

Then he led her away, and gave her into the charge of the good woman who had helped them in the night, who regarded her with some suspicion, but relented at the spectacle of her distress, and took her away to another room.

Brand came in soon afterwards, and brought only the disappointing tidings that Worsley was not in when he reached the studio, but that he had learned from the woman at the door that Miss Worsley had gone down to the country in less than an hour after he had left them in the morning.

Romilly was worn out with all that he had gone through, and his look of intense disappointment went to Brand's heart.

‘Look here, Lewis,’ said he eagerly,

laying a brotherly hand on his shoulder, 'you'll get down there to-night if you make a dash for it—at any rate, you can get to Windon, for I know every mortal train on the line; and you'll get a fly there to take you on. I'll make myself responsible for everything here.'

Romilly was thinking of all that it involved, and did not answer at once.

'You're not fit, you know, to stay here,' urged Brand; 'and it's my opinion that if Ella is keeping up as she did this morning, she'll go out of her mind; and if she gives way—why, she will want you just as much.'

'I'll go,' said Romilly. 'You're a good fellow, Jim. I'll leave it all to you, then; but I'll come back the day after to-morrow at the latest—and Jim——'

'Well?'

‘Be good to poor Victorine. This has been a shock to her.’

‘I should hope so!’ ejaculated Jim, rather angrily.

Suddenly Romilly stood still.

‘No,’ he said; ‘I can’t go to-night. I must see those papers first.’

‘What! Do you mean to say you don’t believe her now?’

‘Yes, I believe her,’ said Romilly, with a faint smile; ‘but then I did all along, you know.’





CHAPTER XI.

‘All the past
Melts mist-like into this bright hour, and this
Is morn to more, and all the rich to come
Reels, as the golden autumn woodland reels
Athwart the smoke of burning weeds.’

The Princess.

BRAND and Romilly went to their hotel that night, and in the morning Romilly hurried to the studio to get the papers he wanted. Here he found Worsley, and told him all that had occurred.

‘I’m going down to The Roses to-day,’ he said when he had told his story, and while Worsley was still lost in half-in-

credulous astonishment, 'only I must first find some of poor Dregert's papers and take them round to my lawyer.'

'I hope there will be nothing to delay you,' said Worsley, following him into Dregert's room, 'for poor Ella's sake.'

'Indeed I hope not,' Romilly answered earnestly, 'but it is impossible to look over papers in a hurry.'

So, indeed, he found; a couple of hours went by before he was sure he had all that he sought. Then he took a cordial leave of Worsley, and drove off with all speed to Lincoln's Inn. The man of business was naturally amazed at the extreme lack of worldly wisdom and shrewdness which his unfortunate client had displayed throughout; but after the lapse of some hours more, he was able to assure him that he was without doubt a perfectly free man.

‘ You’ll prosecute the woman, of course,’ said the lawyer. ‘ Think of the thousands of pounds she has obtained on false pretences. I really cannot help being staggered, Mr. Romilly, at the ease with which she has duped you. No doubt it was fear of the law, in your hands, that prevented her from acknowledging her husband when they met that night, and then remorse prevailed.’

‘ Poor thing!’ muttered Romilly, more to himself than to the other. ‘ I am not going to prosecute her. Why don’t you advise Sir John to prosecute me first?’

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders with a smile, and let his unpractical client depart.

Romilly drove to Waterloo without another instant’s delay, and found that the next train would not start for three quarters of an hour, a period over which, out of regard

for him, I am going to draw the veil of silence.

When Ella woke that morning after brief and troubled sleep, she felt weak and ill; her head ached and her limbs were stiff and heavy. Mrs. Worsley tried to persuade her to stay in bed at least for breakfast, but she dreaded idleness and solitude more than any pain or weariness, and came down as usual. The grown-up people were all painfully silent, and the careless chatter of the children jarred on their nerves; indeed Ella was the only one who seemed not to mind it, and even smiled now and then at their sallies of childish wit, at Stella's pomposity and Gog's buffoonery.

The snow had been thawing fast since midnight, and a heavy fog now hung oppressively over all the outer world. The wet from yesterday's overflow had not by any

means dried up yet; the paper hung damp and wrinkled on the walls; the cracked ceilings were all discoloured and still wet; and the house smelt of mould and size, and was as chilly as the bottom of a well might be, and scarcely more habitable.

Janet and her stepmother thought they were doing Ella a kindness when they proposed that she should take the children to their lessons in the drawing-room where it was warm, while they went about the house-work.

Ella acquiesced to please them, although, in the state she was in, the hardest physical toil would have been more welcome.

So she was shut into the drawing-room with four of them.

Nora laboured mechanically at her five-finger exercises on the piano, and when she came to the new one, made the same mistake

which she had been making when Ella went away; Sidney squeaked a pencil up and down on his slate as he copied out a piece of prose; Stella brought up a German exercise with many careless mistakes and stupid blunders in it; and Madge was in one of her funny moods, and tried to make an appropriate joke over every word she spelt.

Ella struggled to attend to them all.

‘Bring your pencil to me, Sid; it has a bad point.’

‘I always write with the other end,’ Sidney explained. ‘Jack says it saves the point.’

‘Oh! you mustn’t swallow everything that Jack says,’ said Ella. ‘*Please*, Nora, do look at your notes, and don’t leave out the sharp every time. Now, Madge, stand still; what does p-i-n spell?’

‘Needle?’ suggested Madge gravely.

‘Madge!’ expostulated Stella, who ought to have been attending to her exercise.

‘Don’t interfere, Stella. Now, Madge, look at the book and think—p-i-n?’

Madge bent down till her little round nose touched the word in question, and then started back violently. ‘It pricks,’ said she; ‘it must be a pin.’

‘Yes,’ said Ella patiently, ‘but you mustn’t play, or you will never remember.’

‘No,’ assented Madge, looking up with solemnity; ‘then it will spell whip-pin, won’t it?’

‘Oh! I hope not. Nora, you must go away from the piano till I can attend to you. Sidney, practise.’

Nora got off the stool, took a few steps sulkily, and then began to cry, while Sidney plunged into his scales with great vigour.

Meanwhile Stella had thrust a grammar into Ella's hand and was repeating a German verb, talking about genitive and dative tenses and plural moods, which, under the circumstances, was perhaps excusable; Madge wriggled all round Ella's knee, where lay her spelling-book, and sought for more witticisms. 'L-e-t let—tart-let,' said she, applying the syllable promptly.

'Stella,' said Ella faintly, 'take Nora away to the dining-room, and then come back and begin your verb again.'

A stand-up fight followed between the two, but Stella eventually succeeded in dragging Nora away, and came back to flounder in the baffling mazes of what Mark Twain has well called 'The Awful German Language'—awful indeed to the child who approaches it through the medium of grammars and exercise-books; scarcely less

awful to the teacher who witnesses the spectacle and is responsible for the result.

Sidney, who had more soul for music than all his sisters put together, now began to play a plaintive German *Volkslied* that Ella had taught him—

‘Du, Du, liegst mir im Herzen’—

one that Romilly had been wont to sing low to himself when they were together. It was the last blow to her composure, and she startled the children by bursting into passionate weeping.

Sidney turned round upon his stool to see what was the matter, Madge climbed her knee and put her little arms round her neck and declared she was going to be very good, and Stella ran to call her mother.

Mrs. Worsley very promptly banished

them all to the dining-room to play quietly, and then insisted on Ella's lying down.

'You are quite exhausted, dear,' said she, making her lie on the sofa. 'You did not sleep all night, and you will be very ill if you don't give way a little. It will all be better in time, darling. There—try and go to sleep; no one shall come near you.' So saying Mrs. Worsley covered her with a rug, and went away to moan over her with Janet.

Ella lay and cried till she cried herself to sleep with sheer exhaustion, and the dismal, foggy morning slowly darkened to dismal, foggy afternoon.

The first announcement of passing events was generally made by the children, and accordingly, just when it was growing too dark to read, and they were beginning to wrangle and feel hungry, Sidney espied an

open fly driving rapidly down the road. The children all ran to the window to look at it, each clearing a private spy-hole on the misty panes with hand, sleeve, or handkerchief, according to sex and age.

‘It’s stopping at our gate!’ cried Sidney; ‘Roland, I do believe.’

‘Roland is the biggest man in the world,’ observed Nora.

‘No, it’s—h’m—*you* know,’ said Sidney significantly. ‘We mustn’t say his name.’

They all drew back a little as the garden-gate clicked, and Romilly walked through the yellow pool outside the window and round to the front door.

‘I’ll let him in,’ cried Sidney, and ran as quietly as he knew how to open the door. ‘‘Sh! ’sh!’’ whispered he as Romilly stepped in on to the mat, and began hastily taking

off his wet greatcoat ; ‘Ella’s ill, and nobody is to make a noise.’

‘Where is she?’ asked Romilly anxiously. ‘Can I see her?’

‘Oh no!’ said Sidney ; ‘but mamma is in the kitchen. Could you come in there—very quietly?’ and he led the way on tip-toe. ‘Mamma, here is the man we mustn’t say the name of.’

Romilly stole gently across the bare boards, thinking of Ella, and came into the kitchen where Janet was scrubbing the table, and Mrs. Worsley, on her knees before the grate, was sweeping up the cinders to make it tidy for the evening.

They both stopped their work and looked at him breathlessly. ‘It’s all right, thank God!’ said he, in a low voice. ‘Where is Ella? Mayn’t I go to her? Is she very ill?’

He was wiping the clinging dew from his

moustache and hair as he spoke, and looked from one to the other in eager anxiety.

‘Oh no!’ said Mrs. Worsley. ‘She is dreadfully shaken by all she went through; and is more prostrate now for having kept up so bravely at first. I am only afraid of the shock—she is asleep.’

Romilly’s face expressed intense relief.

‘I’ll take that upon myself,’ he said, as he turned to the door. ‘May I go?’ But he did not wait for an answer, and stole quietly to the other room, closing the door after him.

His heart beat violently at the first sight of the still, white face, with its closed eyes, lying in the cold grey light that fell through the greenhouse; and the next instant he was kneeling beside her, holding his breath, and gazing at her face with all its piteous tokens of misery—the drooping mouth, the clouded

brow, and the dark stains under the closed eyes all wet with tears.

He could not help it; he did not mean to wake her, but before he knew what he did her face was on his breast, and his own bent down and pressed close against it, with low, hurrying words of tenderness and comfort :

‘Ella—my Rachel!—my love!—my wife!—it is all past and gone by, and nothing can part us any more. There, don’t cry, my darling! lie still a little while and listen!’ and then, gradually, between the stormy sobs that worked their will on her, soothing her with quiet, patient tenderness, he told her how it had all come about, from the time he left her so abruptly in the middle of the play two nights ago down to this moment, when he had come back to her for ever.

Ella clung to him as if afraid to lose him again—to wake, perhaps, and find it only a dream.

‘Never mind,’ said he, with a sweet, happy smile, as he kissed away her tears and made her smile too ; ‘call the past a dream, and this the waking reality.’

* * * * *

And so they all lived happy ever after. Romilly and Ella were married almost immediately, and, after a week or two in Paris, came down to live at Sunley Park with old Sir John.

‘You two have been away,’ said the old man, smiling rather slily, ‘but I have had you both here all the time.’

Ella looked at her husband for an explanation, and Lewis looked at his uncle.

‘Give me your arm, my boy, as far as Ella’s morning-room,’ said Sir John, and

the three went there together. 'These are two pictures I once came across in London, when—when I was left to myself,' said the old man with a covert smile, and I have since thought you two might like to have them, so there they are!'

It was Worsley's picture of Ariadne, whereby, in the memory of both, hung many a curious tale ; and Dregert's picture of Lancelot, in his penitence, kneeling by the churchyard cross.

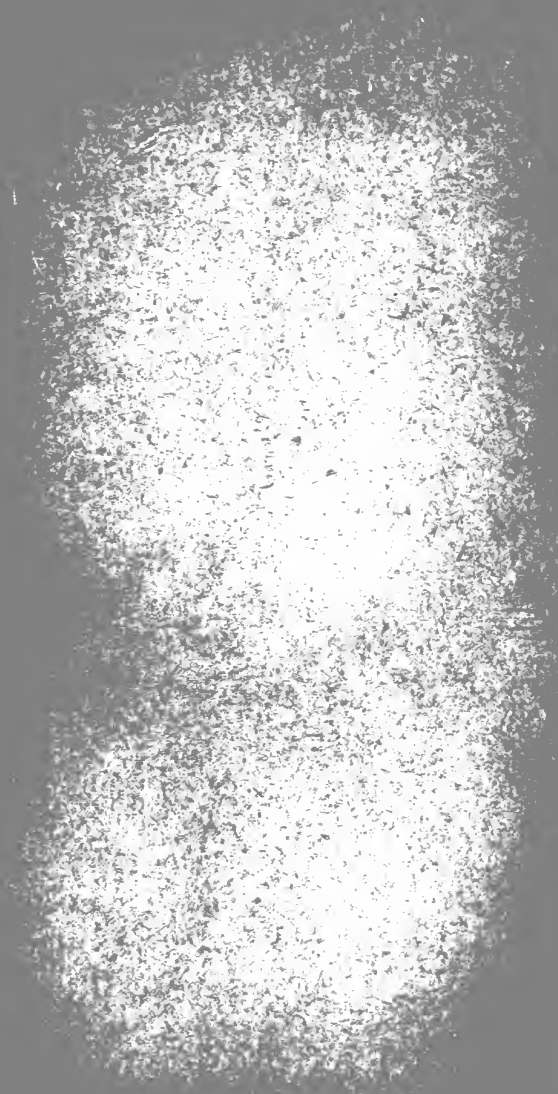
When not only Ella—who perhaps of all his family was his most congenial companion—but also Janet, had married and gone away, and her husband had carried off Jack besides, Worsley found himself deprived at one blow of nearly all the working staff of his little home in the country, and soon afterwards removed his wife and the

children to London, where they led a life rather more conformed to received opinions.

It may be some relief, too, to the reader's feelings, as it is to mine, to know that Brand and his wife, and Jack, as they redeem their beloved wilderness, are preparing to receive and, as it were, plant out some of the superfluous little Worsleys in a few years' time. Victorine has disappeared again—who knows whither? Barry is the same as ever; he seems to have forgotten the short romance of his life, and is a confirmed and comfortable bachelor.

As for that vocation of literature?

THE END.



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